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Prologue

Kougami's carefully made plan to surprise Azechi on the morning of her birthday went off to a rocky start, but the after school event goes well, so everyone is happy. Kougami seems relieved, and also more enthusiastic than usual today. Seeing Azechi more happy about seeing Kougami than any of her surprises makes me feel like this is what they mean when they talk about "youth." I've now realized that it's hard to be on the receiving end of a surprise, so you have to be careful. Those two have always been close, but seeing them now, I feel like they're something special to each other.

To finish off her birthday, we head to Oliver's to get extra large parfaits. The portions are big for their price, which is great for students. The western style interior makes it easy to chat and laugh with other people. Melon soda, fruit preserved in syrup, chocolate flakes, pudding with ice cream, whipped cream and cracker sandwiches… All in one luxurious, giant glass. We make a toast to Imai and I, then to Kougami and Azechi. "One more time!" Azechi says with a smile, over and over again.

"I don't mind if you want to keep doing this, but shouldn't you hurry up and eat that…"

Azechi purses her lips at me for saying that. "I know, but I still want to give Yuriko her own toast!"

"Cheers!"

Imai makes a false start before Azechi can finish speaking, and holds up her parfait. But, well… It's fine.

"But why?" Kougami modestly holds up the huge parfait glass with a confused, yet happy, expression.

"Because you decided on your career path, Yuriko! So I wanted to make a toast."

"It's not like you need to celebrate… It's embarrassing, so let's not."

"How could we not celebrate when you were so worried about it?!"

“Yeah… But… It was just a decision, or rather, it was decided on…”

That’s a strangely awkward way of phrasing it, even though she finally decided on a career path after being so troubled by it.

“…What do you mean?”

She seems rightfully worried about the parfaits. Azechi takes a big spoonful of bright, white cream and puts it in her mouth. The rest of us follow suit. However, Kougami just sullenly pokes a cherry with the end of her spoon.

“It’s just… I ended up deciding by drawing lots…”

“…Huh?” My surprised voice overlaps with the sound of a cherry falling off the cream and onto the table.

“Isozaki-sensei said… If I can’t decide, I should leave it to fate…” Kougami says in a small voice with her face crumpled up as she looks at the fallen cherry.

“R-really?!”

“I looked up a list of the most popular jobs, and wrote down each one from the top 20 on slips of paper, then just… Drew one. I ended up getting ‘doctor.’” Kougami’s cheeks are bright red as she responds to Azechi’s surprise.

“What? Then… You’re going to go to med school, too?”

I want to go into forensic medicine… I’ll be working with the dead, but it’s still a kind of “doctor.”

“Yeah, it seems like it. When I talked to my parents about it… They said it sounded like a good fit for me. Apparently I liked to play doctor with my dolls as a kid… That was just a game, though.”

“I think you’re better suited for it than Tatewaki is… Especially your grades.”

“That’s mean!” I would normally have stolen her beloved cherry from her parfait, but I wouldn’t commit such a vile atrocity on her birthday. Besides, Azechi’s opinion doesn’t matter.

“How could Zakiiso let you do that? He’s definitely going to get in trouble.”

Everyone nods silently.

“Then… How did you decide, Azechi?” Imai asks after spitting out his cherry seeds into a napkin.

“I decided ages ago.”

“You did? Come to think of it… I don’t think you’ve ever told me what you want to do.”

Even though she looks like a mysterious goth, Azechi is surprisingly realistic and down to earth. I have no idea what career she could possibly have in mind. She could probably do anything with no issues, like going to a regular university, or going to a dressmaking school. When Azechi responds with a completely straight face, I- no, all three of us- stare in stunned silence.

“I *said* I want to be a police officer.”

“Why?!” I ask.

“Are you kidding?!” Imai says.

“But cops can’t wear goth dresses!!” Kougami exclaims.

“I already decided before I even came to Asahikawa.” Azechi purses her blue-black lips and looks at her feet. “When things were rough for me, the person who helped me most wasn’t a friend, teacher, or parents… It was a police woman from the community safety division.”

Before coming to Asahikawa, Azechi made the mistake of clinging to a toxic friendship. It’s rare for her to talk about herself like this. All of us sit up straighter and pay close attention to what she’s saying.

Seeing us all like that, Azechi forces a smile. “Quit it!” she says playfully. “…If it weren’t for her, I probably wouldn’t be here right now. The scars will never fully go away, but I believe that I can help people who have suffered the same way I did. I’m sure there’s something that only I can do to help,” the normally rambunctious Azechi says, much more seriously than she normally is.

“Oh,” Imai says. “I get you.”

Imai always used to cry when he got hurt, and playing tennis meant getting hurt a lot. He wants to become a physical therapist to help other people who can’t move on their own.

“I think… People try to make up for not being able to achieve their dreams by helping other people do what they couldn’t. I’m sure people have been doing that forever.”

Imai's earnestness and Azechi's determination inspire me to work hard for my own goals. Seeing Kougami's smile is so sweet that even my parfait seems bitter in comparison.

I invite Kougami to go to our usual tea shop tomorrow. I thought she might refuse, but she secretly responds to my text saying yes. Christmas is getting closer, so I can feel the excitement in the air. Maybe I'm just projecting my own impatience and business that I only have a year left. The tea shop is noisier than usual, too. Kougami sighs at her steaming cup of tea.

"I wonder how people find their dream."

How… I wonder, too. Our dreams for the future are so simple as kids, but can become shackles for us as we grow up. Why should 16-17 year old kids have to decide what they'll do for the rest of their nearly 100 year long lives? Why should they be scolded for being unable to choose? I never would have thought of becoming a forensic scientist if I hadn't met Sakurako-san, and all of the other people I've met through the cases we've worked together.

"In my case, I think the trigger was… Feeling helpless."

"Helpless?"

"Yeah, when it makes you feel overwhelmed and insignificant. I think dreams are born from the pain and emotion that stirs your heart."

"Stirs your heart…" Kougami blinks slowly.

"Yeah. It's not just doing something you like, it's doing something you have awe and respect for…"

Of course, everyone finds their dream at a different time, and it varies from person to person. It could be something like inheriting the family business, or trying to meet your parents' expectations. That's how it was for me, at least. I used to be empty inside, but now I've found a path to follow.

"I think that when people are knocked down, they look for their own path. That moment is when they realize that the path they've been following was paved by someone else, or it's not the path they truly want to follow."

Even though I'm the one who said all of that, deep down, I still feel uneasy that the path I'm going down isn't really my own. Am I

just turning my back to the evil before me, and choosing the easy way out?

"But… Kougami, you're a lot more clever than the rest of us, right? So you probably haven't had an experience like that yet." I try my best to sound cheerful, and push my own anxiety to the side.

"I'm not clever at all."

"Yes, you are. Any anyway… You'll be fine. You'll find your dream someday."

"There's no telling if that's true…" Kougami holds her teacup in both hands, and looks at me like she isn't fully convinced.

"I know it's true, because we're friends."

"What?"

"Since we're friends, I know all of the good things about you that you don't realize you have. I'm sure Imai and Azechi would say that same thing, too. That's why I know for sure that you'll be fine."

"…"

We may be worried about her, but it's not because we think her future looks bleak. We just don't want her to feel worried or depressed. Kougami's eyes are wide, like she's surprised by my answer.

"But I've said terrible things to you before…"

"That's true, but if you really hated me, you wouldn't talk to me about something important like this."

Kougami doesn't say anything. Instead, tears start to fall from her eyes.

"W-why are you crying?!"

"It's nothing… I get it now."

"Hm?"

"I'll persevere! Even though my path was decided by a lottery, and yours wasn't! Let's study together. I'll study with you every day, and then we'll both definitely get into university!"

"Really?"

"I'll make sure you become a forensic pathologist!"

"Wh… Okay?"

For a minute, I wonder what she's been thinking about, and how she arrived at this conclusion. She tightly holds my hand in both

of hers, and speaks forcefully.

"I don't want to get in the way of your studying, though."

"Don't worry, I'm sure teaching you will help me."

Well, in that case, I'm really grateful. For some reason, I always find it hard to study on my own. I'm always trying to come up with reasons not to study, or reasons why I can't study to avoid it. Besides, Kougami's explanations are always easy to understand. If she thinks it'll help her learn, too, then I couldn't ask for anything better.

"Let's do this together!"

It's been so long since I saw Kougami smiling so happily. It makes me happy, too.

I live my everyday life as Shoutarou Tatewaki. I don't belong to anyone else, and I'm nobody's puppet. At the start of December, that's what I truly believed. No, it's what I wanted to believe. I wanted to believe it so, so badly. I keep remembering the promise I made that day to Aoba-san at the tea shop I always go to. Every time it makes me aware of my own weakness.

Part 1

I still remember the first time that I saw a non-skeletal corpse of someone outside of my family. It was Kiyomi Muzutani, a woman who lived in one of the apartments my mom owns. Seeing the fresh corpse of such a beautiful person, with those empty, soulless eyes… I felt more disgusted than sad. I felt sick to my stomach. As I threw up my convenience store tuna onigiri into the garbage can, I learned that humans see death as more of an annoyance than a fear.

But now, after seeing countless corpses with Sakurako-san, I don't hate them anymore. I feel even more sad and frustrated now. I get this uncontrollable feeling of anger and impatience. I want to know more. I *need* to know more. How did they die? What exactly happened, and what is their corpse trying to tell us?

I look up to see Hector happily playing in the river. He's cheerfully floating along the water's surface with the birds. Nagayama-Shinkawa is full of waterfowl in the winter. The river was

artificially created to protect the city from flood damage, but since the Hokkaido Development Bureau worked hard to make it as natural as possible, it's teeming with wildlife. Besides the usual ducks and herons, you can see swans, and even white-tailed eagles if you're lucky.

After school, Azechi came with me to visit Sakurako-san. When she heard about the river, she said that she really wanted to see the swans. I think she might have only said that because she was tired of trying to pick Hector's shed fur off of her black dress. It's Hector's shedding season, so his hair gets everywhere. Nobody objects to her suggestion, though.

We all take an evening walk along the river. Hector seems unusually excited. He's usually more docile than this. He's kind of a dork when he plays, though. Even if you tease him, he always smiles, and rarely gets angry. There's only one thing that gets Hector so excited that he can't control himself. When he smells the putrid scent of a human corpse. Sakurako-san's eyes light up when she notices the change in his behaviour .

It couldn't be… I carefully examine my surroundings. Then, I notice it. Part of a body is floating down the river. It's unthinkable that there's a corpse in the river, but it doesn't disgust me like it used to. At first, Azechi approaches the river, thinking it was just a mannequin or something. When she notices the cuts and bruises from where birds had picked at it, she throws up the snacks she had at Sakurako-san's house.

Once again, I'm reminded about how much I've changed over the past year or two. At the same time, I feel remorse. I feel bad for Imai, Azechi, and Kougami, getting such a shock. I wish I'd noticed faster so the three of them wouldn't have had to see a corpse.

As always, I follow Sakurako-san down the riverbank as she snaps her nitrile gloves against her wrists. Azechi is in no state to be left in charge, so I leave the rioting Hector to Kougami and Imai. The ducks and swans flee as I walk through the water, like Moses parting the sea. As the scent of fish and blood fills my nose, I think to myself that maybe I shouldn't have come with Sakurako-san, after all.

I've thought about it over and over again. Sakurako-san is abnormal. Undaunted by the fact that it's winter, she plunges into the river to pull out a dead body, getting soaked in the process. Even though she's shivering all over, her lips are blue, and her teeth are chattering, she gleefully performs her autopsy as usual, examining the limbs and decapitated upper body while showing off her fast knowledge of forensics. Standing in front of the corpse with her cheeks red from the cold and excitement, Sakurako-san's delighted smile is beautiful.

"Stop! What are you thinking, jumping into the river like that? You're going to catch a cold."

"There's no medical basis showing that cold weather leads to catching a cold. I should be more worried about hypothermia right now, hahaha."

"It's not funny!" I say as I drape my down jacket over her shoulders. I'm even weirder for calling the police so calmly.

It isn't normal. I never want this bizarre monster to change, and I want to stay by her side forever. If I could, I'd like to continue looking for dead things with her for the rest of my life. I want to be by her side… But on that day at the tea shop, I made a promise with Aoba-san that gouged my heart. I absolutely must keep that promise in order to protect both Sakurako-san's and my futures. Even if I have to lie to the most important person in my world for the rest of my life…

So, I spend my Saturday exchanging information with the police, filing my report as usual while supporting my traumatized friends. I expected a bizarre mystery case, but by Tuesday the city is shaken by the news report about how a man in his 40s killed his mistress in a love affair and abandoned her corpse. By Thursday, my friends have started to finally return to their normal lives after being depressed.

Then, a man appears before me. As Hanabusa's ghost stands before us, frightening us with his sense of justice, another "person of justice" arrives.

Part 2

He came to me abruptly, the same way a disaster can destroy your everyday life in an instant. He's standing on the other side of the school gate, while Kougami and I are headed out for our after-school study session. He's wearing a 3 piece suit, a tight tie, and shiny shoes. I don't know anything about brands, but after seeing so many people like Ariwara-san wearing expensive clothing, I've started to be able to tell when someone is wearing something expensive. His smooth bowl cut suits him perfectly, even though I know I'd get laughed at if I had the same haircut. He looks to be in his late 20s to early 30s, somewhere around Sakurako-san's age. He's wearing a black chesterfield coat and a cashmere scarf, but he still looks a bit cold. He has narrow, fox-like eyes, almost like a string is pulling on his eyelids from behind his frameless glasses. Everything about him looks so good that it's almost disgusting.

I don't know this man, but something about him gives me a bad feeling. I grab Kougami's hand and try to walk by him quickly, but…

"I'd like to talk to you. Could you spare some time, Shoutarou Tatewaki-kun ?"

My grip on Kougami's hand tightens.

"…" My heart is pounding so hard that my back is trembling.

"You are Shoutarou Tatewaki-kun, aren't you?"

I try to pretend like I don't hear him, but he's clearly calling my name. Kougami squeezes my hand back as I reluctantly turn my head. She looks at me with a stiff, upset expression and shakes her head. Seeing her look so scared helps me calm myself down. This person knows my face and name already, so there's no point in running away. That would only put Kougami in danger, and I definitely don't want that.

"…What do you want?" I take a shaky breath and turn to face the man.

"This should tell you."

He quickly searches through his coat pocket and pulls out a business card. I can feel Kougami's tension through her hand as I take the card from him. Her anxiety helps encourage me. I'm still

scared of agreeing to talk to him, so for now I just read the card he gave me.

"Ezo Newspaper - Local news reporter - Mamoru Yakuwa."

I look at Kougami, who is peering out from behind me. Her eyebrows are deeply furrowed.

"…You're from the newspaper?"

"Yes. I've been following a certain case, and I'd like to talk to you about it, Tatewaki-san."

"You want to talk to *me?* "

"Yes."

"A certain case… Which one?" I reflexively ask. How am I supposed to know what case he's talking about?

"Ahahaha," He laughs loudly at my reply. "Rather… What one do you think it is?"

"…"

I don't know what to say. I don't want to say something carelessly and cause trouble for other people, or reveal something I shouldn't. There's no way I can answer a question like that. I quickly realize how unnatural my silence is. He's probably thinking I'm suspicious, just like how I think the same about him.

"…Okay. If you have questions, I'll answer them."

I have no choice but to answer his questions with the utmost care. I take his business card, and try to stand up straighter with my chest out a little.

"No… You shouldn't, Tatewaki-kun —"

"I don't want to draw attention by standing and talking here, so how about we go to the coffee stand by the station?"

Also, I don't want to involve Kougami in this. After silently mouthing "sorry" to the worried Kougami, I invite the reporter to a different location. For some reason, I don't want to let him have full control over everything.

"In that case, I'll treat you to apologize for interrupting your date."

“It’s not a date. We were having a study group.” I say firmly. Kougami nods, too. I tell her to head home alone as I stand between her and the reporter.

“You don’t need to be so cautious… I’m not a suspicious or dangerous man.”

“This is a normal level of caution.”

He might cause trouble for Sakurako-san, too. I stop a taxi that just passed us. The reporter doesn’t seem to have any objections. It’s scary getting into a taxi with someone you don’t know, but at least if worse comes to worst, I can ask the driver for help.

“…Even though it’s only been a few years, Asahikawa’s scenery has changed a lot,” He says without looking at me, his eyes drawn to the landscape passing by outside the window. Neither of us have had much to say, just waiting to get to our destination.

“Hm? …Are you from Asahikawa, then?” I’m a bit surprised to hear the reporter saying that so seriously.

“No, I’m from England. When I started working at the Ezo Newspaper, Asahikawa was the first city I was assigned to.”

“England to Asahikawa… You had to travel pretty far, then.”

“That’s just where I was born, then I lived in Egypt until I was 8. My father worked at the embassy. I’ve lived in Japan ever since then.”

“Egypt!” I was surprised to hear he was born in England, but even more surprised to hear he grew up in Egypt.

I suddenly realize I’ve become a bit less wary of him. I can’t help but feel like I was drawn in by the familiarity of him having a connection to Asahikawa, and the power of hearing about living in foreign countries. No, I can’t let him pull me in. I have to be careful. Especially for Sakurako-san’s sake.

I’m scared to go somewhere private with him, so I lead him to the coffee stand by the station that’s always crowded. He treats me to some cocoa.

“Are you… Really a reporter for the Ezo Newspaper?”

“If you don’t believe me, why don’t you go to the office and ask? It’s on 4jo-dori.”

“No, that’s okay…”

If I did that, it would be even harder to escape from him. I watch the crowds of people walk across the intersection. I wonder what incident he wants to talk about, and why?

The memory of Sakurako-san telling me about Hariti at this same intersection is burned into my memory. How did this all start, again? A woman looking for a torii… Kiyomi-san, the woman who lived in an apartment my mom manages… My youth really has been filled with all kinds of crimes and corpses.

“…In Aztec culture, cocoa was a drink meant for kings. Or rather, it was considered sacred. It represented the heart and blood.” Yakuwa-san says, looking at the thick, brown liquid.

“What? Blood…?”

“Yes. They drank cocoa when they made sacrifices to the gods, and feared death. They said that cocoa got rid of any fear, though I don’t believe it has any special effects like that.”

“Me neither.”

Come to think of it, I drank hot chocolate after I saw Kiyomi-san’s body… I end up ignoring what Yakuwa-san is saying. Sakurako-san loves cocoa. If it’s meant to represent sacred blood, then I think that suits her perfectly. She sometimes reminds me of a vampire. Drinking hot chocolate with Sakurako-san always helps me relax, but today, I’m feeling very uneasy. I guess it isn’t an effect from the hot chocolate.

“…I don’t really have anything to tell you.”

“That’s not true at all. Normal people don’t get stabbed when they go on trips, and they don’t find dead bodies everywhere they go,” Yakuwa-san says without changing his expression.

I don’t know what case he wants to talk about, but I’ve only been stabbed once. He knows about the Satsuki Usubuchi incident in Hakodate. I instantly get goosebumps. That incident was definitely related to “Hanabusa.” Contrary to the subject matter, Yakuwa-san’s tone and demeanor are gentle. His words feel sharper than Satsuki-san’s knife. Who… Who is this man? Is he Sakurako-san and I’s enemy?

“Maybe I should change the way my question is phrased? What should I ask first? How about the dismembered corpse from last week?”

“Oh, that! I was just going to see the swans with my friends! I didn’t really find the remains, or anything!”

That incident was totally a force majeure, and has nothing to do with Hanabusa. Dismemberment of corpses is often done to make it easier to dispose of, or make it harder for people to identify the body. It’s rarely done by impulse.

“…The remains?” When he hears my rebuttal, the reporter laughs.

“…What do you mean?”

“Nothing. It’s just that whenever I go to the scene of a crime where a person died, nobody from the general public has ever referred to the person as “remains” before.”

“Huh?” Having that pointed out makes me feel like I’ve made a mistake.

“Most people just say ‘the body,’ or something of the sort.”

He’s right. I used to say that, too. I’ve been surrounded by people involved in forensics, like Aoba-san and Professor Shitara. I was impressed by how respectfully they treat the dead, and picked up using “remains” from them.

“…I’m trying to become a forensic pathologist,” I reluctantly confess. It shouldn’t really be related to any of the crimes, though.

“What made you choose that path?”

“Well… There were a lot of reasons that went into making the decision.”

“That must be why you go chasing after all those corpses, then.”

“Wha…”

“I used to live in Asahikawa, so I’ve come to learn a few things. For example, I’ve heard of a strange pair of people who have come across a lot of dead bodies over the past 2 years.”

I gulp. He definitely heard it, too. I might as well be saying “I’m suspicious,” out loud.

“And besides you, there’s someone else…”

“It’s a coincidence!” I don’t want to hear any more. I have to get out of here. I get up from my seat. “It’s all just a coincidence.”

“You must be joking.” He stares at me with an icy cold smile, and motions for me to sit back down. “Even reporters who desperately try to follow crimes don’t encounter as many corpses as you have in 2 years. There’s no way that’s a coincidence.”

“They say that the truth is stranger than fiction. How do you suppose that a mere high school student, even a slightly unusual one, could come across that many corpses? Do you think I have something to do with these murders? Or maybe you think I’m a bloodthirsty serial killer?”

“…”

I finally gather the courage to argue back. For the first time, the reporter seems to be at a loss for what to say.

“Please excuse me, and thank you for the hot chocolate.”

I have to leave while I have the chance. As I stand up, the reporter quickly grabs my wrist.

“L-let go of me, please!”

“…We’re not done talking.”

“Yes, we are. I don’t know anything about these incidents. I have nothing to do with them!”

“I’m not here to repeatedly serve cabbage.”

Rather than letting go of me, the reporter tightens his grip. His face clearly show disgust for a moment.

“…Cabbage?”

“Yes, as in crambe repetita.”

“What?”

I don’t understand what he’s saying at first, so I can’t help but ask.

“You’re the one looking for knots in a reed stalk.”

So says a dignified voice that I can clearly pick out, even in a noisy cafe. I instantly start to sweat.

“You’re looking to make something out of nothing, like looking for a non-existent knot in a reed stalk. We have nothing to do with

those cases."

"Sakurako-san…"

I don't need to turn around to confirm. I could never mistake or forget her voice. She squeezes me from behind, like she's protecting me from the reporter.

"W… Why are you here?"

"Because of Yuriko. She called me in a panic because you were taken away by a strange man. Make sure you tell her that you're safe later. Anyway, this boy is a minor and is unrelated to the case. You can talk to me instead." Sakurako-san says the first half to me, and the second half to the reporter.

While I'm relieved, my anxiety grows ever deeper and darker. I'm also flustered by the feeling of her soft, warm body against me.

"I was planning on talking to you next, of course, but I wanted to talk to Shoutarou-kun today." The reporter's expression doesn't change at all.

I feel Sakurako-san's grip tighten around me. I'm happy, but I can't bear the guilt and discomfort, so I break free from her grasp.

"But… There really isn't anything to talk about. We go out looking for dead animals, and somehow wind up getting into trouble."

"Dead animals?" The reporter raises one of his eyebrows.

"Oh, right. I build skeletal specimens."

Sakurako-san gets between me and the reporter. She looks annoyed. She's invading my space, so I have no choice but to move to the chair next to her so she can sit in mine.

"There's nothing strange or criminal about it, it's simple academic curiosity. I find animals that have already died, collect the bodies, perform an autopsy to find out how they died, strip off the skin and flesh, then assemble the skeletons. I do sell them, but I mostly give them to educational facilities."

Sakurako-san crosses her arms and glares at the reporter. She looks beautiful and scary at the same time.

"I always have dead animals around, but I don't derive pleasure from taking their lives. That's why I only collect corpses that I find. I'm more of a 'scavenger' than a 'predator.' As a result, I sometimes

find human corpses while out looking for animals, but I obviously don't take human corpses home with me."

I'm not sure how much the reporter understands or believes Sakurako-san's explanation. Seeing how serious she is, the reporter sighs.

"You really think I'd believe that?"

"But I am telling the truth. You have to believe me, or I'll be in trouble. This boy is my assistant, he's kind of like my disciple. He wants to go into forensic medicine someday. Anyway, that's who we are. Every case we've run into has been a coincidence."

"Isn't that a rather convenient coincidence?"

"Think about it this way. Animals avoid humans, so they die in inconspicuous places like fields and mountains. People who die in secret and people who want to hide a body will end up in the same place as the animals."

"…"

The reporter looks at me, rather than Sakurako-san. I don't know how to respond, so I timidly nod. He shrugs his shoulders.

"Anyway, we haven't broken any laws, and we don't intend to. The corpses just keep falling into our laps."

"Then how would you explain the Hakodate incident, Sakurako Kujou-san?"

"Just Sakurako is fine. As for Hakodate…"

The reporter smiles slightly when Sakurako-san hesitates for a moment. Sakurako-san is smart, and she isn't easily swayed by others, but she doesn't really like people. She isn't that good at communicating. It's hard to keep lying to a reporter that's used to following cases and talking to people.

"As you said, Hakodate wasn't really a coincidence."

"Boy."

"No matter how hard we try to hide it, the truth will get out eventually. We might as well just tell him now."

Sakurako-san grabs the cuff of my sleeve to stop me, but I politely shake her off.

"As I said, the Hakodate incident wasn't a coincidence. We were investigating a case that a forensic science professor we know

was investigating before. We got carried away with playing detective after finding a corpse, and I got hurt as a result. We won't let it happen again," I say clearly. There are no lies in what I said.

"Playing detective?" The reporter says, trying to probe for more information.

"I want to know everything about bones," Sakurako-san replies with a strangely smug look on her face, and her arms crossed.

The reporter takes a sip of his cocoa while he thinks. Cocoa is divine blood. Is he really going to write about us in the newspaper?

"…In that case, how about I tell you two a fun story?"

"What is it?"

"Exactly one year ago, there was a hit and run in Asahikawa."

He holds out a newspaper clipping. It's a small, inconspicuous article. The accident happened not too far from Asahiyama zoo, in an area surrounded by fields with few lights. The victim was a middle aged man. He was hit while walking alone just past 10pm. They're still trying to identify him, it says. It's sad that it happened, but at a glance, nothing looks particularly special about the incident. There's not enough information to make a fair judgment, though.

"What… Is this?"

"This article doesn't seem particularly noteworthy… But there's actually something strange about it." He holds out a file containing several articles and photographs. He seems to have done some research on this on his own. "The victim still hasn't been identified. It wasn't an area where you would expect anyone to walk around except for locals. It happened in early December. Why was he walking around there on a winter night?"

"Sure, it is weird that someone would walk there alone…"

"Continue," Sakurako-san says arrogantly.

"There was only one victim, but that doesn't mean there was only one person there."

"You mean there was someone else with him?"

"…" Rather than answering me, the reporter hands me a photograph.

"This… Is a skull ? Is it the victim's?"

The picture shows a milky white skull with a tawny tinge. The picture was taken from the front. At first glance, it looks like a woman, but… I'm not sure. The reporter covers the picture with his hand before I can take a closer look.

"You're in the way." Sakurako-san glares at the reporter.

"You want to see it that badly?"

"Of course I do!"

"But it's just an ordinary, clean bone. Can you really find anything out from just one skull?" The reporter teases her.

Sakurako-san leans forward so far that the table shakes. "I can. The skull is one of the most eloquent of the bones. It has a mouth, after all," Sakurako-san says jokingly, but it's true. The skull, and mouth in particular, is among the most oratory bones.

The reporter looks up at Sakurako-san and I for a moment, as if he's searching for something, then silently holds out the photo.

"Oh! What a lovely skull. It's beautiful… And still fresh," Sakurako-san says with wonder in her voice.

"There's also pictures from different angles, and with the mouth both open and closed."

"Don't hold back, then. Hand them over," She says bluntly as she picks up the photo.

The reporter lets out a short sigh, like he's given up. "You're very rude. That's not how an intelligent person should speak."

"I'm not rude, I just don't like idle chatter. Conversations should be concise."

"Please," I say reluctantly.

I have to buy something if we're going to stay here any longer. I get cocoa with chocolate sauce and whipped cream added. When I return to the table, she's using the magnifying glass attached to the compass on her car keys to examine the photograph.

"…I see. How fascinating." Soon, Sakurako-san sighs with a satisfied grin.

"What's fascinating?"

"It's just a photo so I can't be sure, but… There's certainly no external trauma, and there's no signs of decapitation. Well, it's

unavoidable that the police wouldn't see any evidence of criminality… This was never sent for an autopsy, was it?"

"…What do you mean?"

"It's just that if I were doing the autopsy, I wouldn't just look at the skull and determine that there's no case. This is a truly rare bone. It's screaming. An eloquent woman." Sakurako-san lets out a breath, unable to contain her excitement.

According to her, there's three things we can learn from this. First is that she was a young woman in her late teens to early twenties. She wasn't decapitated, but her head was removed from her body by someone with a certain level of skill. They didn't use a knife, but something flimsier… Such as a palette knife, for example. As Sakurako-san clearly explains this to us, the reporter watched with no change in his expression, watching with cold eyes.

"Also… There's another, more important thing I noticed," she says, sliding a photo of the skull with its mouth open over the table for us to see.

"Boy, do you notice anything about this arch?" Sakurako-san's fingertip slowly traces the curve of the teeth.

"…I don't know what it is… But… Something doesn't seem quite right."

"I see. That's good enough for now, since you've probably never seen this before. Judging by the jaw shape and the arch of the teeth, the owner of this bone wasn't fully Asian. She was probably part black."

"Oh…"

I see. Now that she has pointed it out, I can see that the shape is different from both the men and women I've seen before. I still don't know how to compare the shapes, or tell the differences yet, though.

"Since it's a dominant gene, it's quite apparent in the bones. I'm not Dr. Quincy, so I can't tell the hair colour from just the bones, but there's a good chance that she had black, curly hair."

Japan is relatively isolated from the rest of the world, so there aren't a lot of people of different ethnicities. The people living here are mostly of Asian descent, so I don't know anything about the

skeletons of other races. I'll have to remember this case well. As I'm staring hard at the pictures, the reporter slides them away and puts it back in the file.

"I see. What makes you say she was young?" The reporter asks. Sakurako-san asks for the pictures back, so the reporter reluctantly complies.

"Look here, at the wear on the teeth and the sutures on the skull. They fuse as a person ages, but they're still clearly defined here. I can't be totally sure, but I'd put this one at around 20 years old. Also, although this skull exhibits some black characteristics, this slight incisor occlusion… Is an Asian trait, which is common among Japanese people."

"So basically… She could be a half or a quarter mixed race?"

As Lord Diavel puts it, they're the letters hidden inside the human head. The skull sutures. Sakurako-san lovingly pets the picture with her fingertip.

"Another thing that I noticed was acid erosion on the teeth."

"Acid erosion… Like the teeth were dissolving?"

"Yes… It can be caused by acid reflux or alcohol use, but… Considering she was a young woman, it could have been an eating disorder. Of course, I can't be sure from just photos alone. That's just how it looks to me."

"…" The reporter listens to our conversation with a grim expression.

"What? Are you doubting us?" Sakurako-san says with a fearless smile. "We happen to run across human corpses while out in the field for our own research. Out of curiosity, we pretend to be detectives. That's all it is. We're not involved in any criminal cases, and have nothing else to say to you."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"You have no choice but to believe it, since it's the truth. The reason the identity of the victim wasn't discovered is because no missing persons report was filed, and he died locally. Oftentimes a person's identity will be found from medical records, but those aren't shared. It can be difficult to find out if the person isn't being treated at a local hospital."

“So basically you think she wasn’t a local?”

“Well… The dental records that the police gather aren’t always accurate. With modern medical advancements, marks left by dental treatment may not be noticeable. Since the police officers aren’t dentists, they tend to make mistakes. It’s a problem for countries without experts to consult,” Sakurako-san says with a very serious expression.

The reporter suddenly starts laughing.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, excuse me. It’s just… You’re correct,” he says, handing me a document.

It says essentially the same thing as what Sakurako-san just said. No, actually, Sakurako-san’s explanation was more detailed.

“What is this?”

“I already asked a forensic scientist for advice. They gave almost the exact same answer as you did.”

“…So you were testing me?”

The reporter just smiles without replying. He isn’t denying it.

“My investigation found that a woman matching the description you provided went missing in Ashibetsu-cho.”

“Oh?”

“An Ichikawa came from a single parent home. Her only close relative, her mother, had already passed away. No missing persons report was filed. Her coworkers said they hadn’t heard from her in 2 years.”

I suddenly realize something.

“Huh? Wait a second… Didn’t you say that the person who died in the accident was a man?”

Yakuwa-san smiles like a fox. “That’s right. This skull was found in the victim’s personal belongings.”

“…What?”

“Rather than a wallet or ID, this skull was found in his bag.”

“Just the skull, nothing else?”

“He also had a change of clothes. He was conscious immediately after the accident, but all he said to the paramedics was

‘it’s my butterfly,’ and ‘I won’t let you take it.’ He lost consciousness on the way to the hospital, and never woke up.”

He had serious lacerations on his head, so he could have been rambling out of confusion. Apparently the paramedics were concerned by what turned out to be his last words. They called the police, who rushed to the hospital and opened the bag. They were shocked to find a skull wrapped up in a cloth.

“But the police decided that the skull wasn’t criminal in nature, and the man’s identity was still unknown. In the end, he was labeled as an unidentified decedent. In 2 years, he’ll be buried in a public cemetery.”

“Given the bizarre situation… I’d be surprised if the skull wasn’t related to a crime.” I say without thinking. Yakuwa-san smiles.

“There were no signs of trauma on the skull. Some people travel with ashes or memorial tablets. I’ve heard that recently people have been putting the ashes of their loved ones in a stuffed animal and incorporating it into their daily lives, or turning their ashes into diamonds…”

“I’ve heard of mourning jewelry, but I don’t think carrying a whole skull is normal. Doesn’t this mean that she wasn’t properly cremated?”

I know about diamonds being made from the bones of the deceased. Kougami was involved in a case related to one a while ago. The bones left after cremation are brittle and white, but this skull is…

“It looks like a specimen before it’s been degreased. The outside has been cleaned, but… Couldn’t it be a replica or something?”

Sakurako-san shakes her head. “As you’d expect, it’s difficult to distinguish between a replica and the real thing. Well, legally speaking, there’s some parts of Japan where burial isn’t prohibited, and even customary. There’s only a few places where burial can be done.”

“…In addition, there may be some times when burial is unavoidable due to sanitary concerns, like during large scale

disasters. Burials are rare in modern Japan, but not nonexistent," the journalist adds

Japan is a country where only the minimum number of autopsies are performed. Even if it's a bit of a strange situation, without any signs of trauma to the skull, or marks on the bones indicating decapitation, it's not unthinkable for the police to determine there's no evidence of a crime. The circumstances are pretty odd, though. But—

"…"

I swallow a mouthful of my cocoa with a stern expression. The reporter looks at me with his probing eyes as the corners of his mouth turn upward.

"But at least almost everyone carries a smartphone around with them these days."

"I don't have one," Sakurako-san says with a snort.

"…Why?"

"Phone calls are a nuisance," She says flatly. The journalist seems uncomfortable.

"Anyway, I believe this incident is criminal in nature. However, if nothing is done, the case will be forgotten to time," I quickly interject to prevent the two of them from arguing.

The time you can store the remains of someone who died while traveling is very limited. The corpse will soon be cremated and buried in a public cemetery, so there's only a short time for the corpse to tell us the truth before it's turned to ash.

"Did he have anything else with him?"

"Nothing that could indicate his identity. Oh, but he did have a ticket stub from the Asahiyama Zoo."

"The Asahiyama one?"

"I think he was just sightseeing in Asahikawa… He might have gotten lost after going to the zoo, or maybe he was going to meet someone."

"During winter?" The journalist says.

"That's a pretty long distance to go on foot. And considering Asahiyama's winter business hours, I still have questions about where he was and what he was doing," Sakurako-san says.

Asahiyama Zoo is open from 10:30am to 3:30pm in winter. The accident happened much later, after 10pm. There are stores near the zoo, but that would still mean that he had to spend at least 7 hours hanging out somewhere.

“The more I learn, the stranger it seems. It’s possible that he chose to end his own life. The police probably thought the same thing-“ Sakurako-san suddenly pauses. The reporter and I stare at her. “The number of suicides in Japan is higher than the number of civilian deaths is Iraq, even though it’s a war zone there. This isn’t just because of social issues in Japan. I wouldn’t make the decision to commit suicide unless the situation was dire.”

“Like the police, I couldn’t find any other leads, so I decided to look into past incidents related to butterflies and skulls.”

“Butterflies?”

“Yes. Don’t you think it’s a strange word?”

It probably seems that way if you don’t already know that humans have a butterfly in their heads.

“…So what did you learn?” I try my best to stay calm, even though the anxiety is making the nape of my neck tingle.

“That there have been a number of cases in Hokkaido where the victim’s skull was missing the sphenoid bone.”

“…”

I already know that, but hearing it from someone else has me on edge. Maybe he’s one of the ghosts trying to lure out Sakurako-san or myself.

“So… Why did you come to visit us, then?” I ask cautiously. I stare at my cup so try to hide the fact that I’m trembling.

“Do I really need to explain it?”

“We already told you that we have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Two people kept showing up in each and every case I found involving butterflies and skulls. You really think you can lie to me?”

The reporter must have done a lot of investigating if he found out about us.

“This is getting tedious. You ought to pay more attention, so we don’t have to keep repeating ourselves.”

Rather than getting angry at Sakurako-san for trying to provoke him, the reporter gives her a nasty look. Sakurako-san looks straight at the reporter and huffs fearlessly. They glare at each other for a moment. The reporter is the first to step down.

"…In that case, we're done. There's no point in wasting your time with more pointless questions."

"Good. Ite, missa est," Sakurako-san gestures at the exit.

The reporter stands up, but he doesn't leave.

"In return, I'd like to see it."

"See what?" Sakurako-san tilts her head to the side.

"I want to see how you two usually 'play detective,'" The reporter says as he slides a file toward us.

"On the day of the accident, a woman committed suicide not too far from where the accident happened. There was no crime committed, so it didn't make it to the news. However, the woman hanged herself in front of a headless doll."

"A… Headless doll?"

I can see Sakurako-san immediately become interested in these two "deaths" and "heads." I notice that the reporter is looking at us with a look of amusement.

"Sakurako-san…" I have a bad feeling, so I tug on her sleeve.

"It's strange, isn't it? Why don't you look into it?" The reporter says, like he's testing us.

"I'm willing to investigate it, but what are you going to do?"

"I appreciate your cooperation. If you find anything out, I'll write an article about it."

"So basically, you're using us?" Sakurako-san says boldly. The reporter laughs.

"Don't get too cocky. Do you expect me to believe that you conveniently found human corpses while out looking for bones? I'll expose you, and your lies."

I'm horrified to see the reporter laughing so hard, like something is funny here. He's serious. He knows that we're involved in a crime.

"Why should we care?" Sakurako-san asks with her brows deeply furrowed.

“Because you can’t prove that you’re innocent,” the reporter replies coldly.

“You should be happy, really. You can’t prove your innocence. No matter how much you beg, that will never change. I’m giving you an opportunity to prove that you’re upstanding citizens. How does that sound?”

Sakurako-san crosses her arms and thinks for a while. This is a dangerous proposition. I know that we’re innocent, But I’m worried about the future. I don’t want to get involved in any trouble.

“…Fine.” Eventually, Sakurako-san agrees.

It seems like it would be dangerous to refuse here. He seems like the type who might stalk us if we did.

“I don’t feel comfortable relying on something as unreliable as a ‘reporter’s intuition,’ but… It also doesn’t feel right to dismiss this as a mere coincidence. Two people died on the same day, at the same time, in almost the same place. I’m sure there’s a connection between them, and I want to write about it.”

“There’s nothing to write about, though,” Sakurako-san huffs. Yakuwa-san narrows his eyes, and smiles slightly.

“Well, then! I should be going now. Oh, and Shoutarou-kun, please tell your girlfriend that I’m sorry for interrupting your date.”

“How many times do I have to tell you she’s not my girlfriend?”

The reporter leaves, seemingly satisfied with accomplishing his goal. I watch him until he completely disappears into the crowd. Sakurako-san squeezes my shoulder.

“Wait… What does he mean by ‘girlfriend’??” Sakurako-san asks me with knitted eyebrows.

“Oh… He means Kougami.”

“Yuriko? You two are in a relationship?!”

“No! What are you even talking about!”

I’ve gone beyond being shocked, and into being annoyed. Sakurako-san suddenly looks serious. This is even worse than when I met the reporter.

“Boy… I think your mother is an intelligent woman, but she can be inflexible. You don’t have a father, either. I want you to listen to

me as your elder… Have you received any biologically, psychologically, and ethically accurate sex education?"

"What?"

"I mean about the act of human reproduction, appropriate contraceptive use—"

"What?! Are you trying to make me mad?!"

"What do you mean? This is an extremely important topic. It's not just about you, it's about how your entire life can be affected! Japan is a country with a shockingly low level of sex education. Incorrect information and improper contraceptive use are widely spread!"

Which is exactly why 'what do you mean' should be my line!

"I-I've heard a lot of stuff from my brother, so please just stop talking!" I shout, my ears burning bright red.

"Let's check with him, then," Sakurako-san says as she tries to grab my phone from on top of the table. I quickly snatch it up.

"Absolutely not, please don't."

"Well, Isozaki is a biology teacher, so—"

"If you asked Isozaki-sensei about reproduction, he'd just tell you about breeding new varieties of plants."

"I see… I'll have Ume make sekihan, then." (TL note: Sekihan is a dish eaten to celebrate something.)

"Sakurako-san, if it wasn't you saying this, I'd probably have punched you."

I just want this to stop. I don't want to talk about this with anyone, but especially not Sakurako-san.

"A-anyway! About the reporter."

"He's a strange man, and must be quite brilliant if he found us."

"…Isn't he dangerous?"

"Who is?"

"…"

I meant Yakuwa-shi, the reporter. Couldn't he be one of Hanabusa's phantoms? As I try to put my anxiety into words, her reply makes me realize that if he isn't a phantom, he might be the one in danger. We all have our safety on the line if we approach this wrong.

“It’s fine. He has investigative techniques that we don’t. Let’s make use of him,” Sakurako-san says with a smile, blowing all my worries away.

“Make use of him?”

“Yeah. We might be able to draw Hanabusa closer… And if needed, we can sacrifice that man.”

“But…”

“He must realize that he’s in at least some danger. Besides, he doesn’t seem like the type to give up, even if we tried to stop him.”

Hearing Sakurako-san say all of that without any hesitation makes me anxious. I take another sip of my cocoa. I tremble slightly from nervousness. It feels like something is quietly expanding, and about to explode.

Part 3

I wondered why the police didn’t make a connection between these two cases, but apparently it’s because they don’t want to dig into the details of any cases that look like a suicide. Sakurako-san says that it’s probably the reason why they didn’t look into the man who died in the accident, too. When a man with hardly any belongings dies in the street, it’s easy for the police to chalk it up to an accident or suicide.

The woman who died was 56 years old, and self employed. She lived alone, and had no family. Her name was Hana Sumiyoshi-san. There was a picture in the file. It was one of those ball jointed, dress up dolls. It looks more realistic than a normal French doll. Its dress is tattered, like ripped gauze against its eerily pale skin. It has a pair of pure white butterfly wings on its back.

I’m amazed at how similar it looks to a real person, but that only makes it stranger that it doesn’t have a head. I’m not sure what material the wings are made from. The way they’re slightly transparent reminds me of a snow apollo. I shudder. The person who made the doll has already passed away, but apparently their work is quite famous. It’s supposed to have a head.

“It looks like a work called The Butterfly Maiden. There are several pieces made with the same motif. The story that goes with

them is that a butterfly visited a woman every night, then she gave birth to a girl with butterfly wings," Yakuwa-san tells us.

It sounds more like a ghost story than a fantasy. The doll itself gives off a feeling of "death" more than "life."

Sumiyoshi-san lived in Pepan, a suburb in Asahikawa. Since the car accident was near Asahiyama… Yeah, it's not very far away. Pepan is an agricultural area to the East of Asahiyama, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Apparently when Pepan is written with kanji it means "cooked rice." It's surrounded by rice fields, but the name comes from the Ainu language, meaning "water, sweet, river."

On a clear summer day, the wind blowing over the rice, the blue sky, and the Taisetsu mountain range make for beautiful scenery. I love to ride my bike around here. It's a little bit lonely in winter, though. It's not exactly what I'd call beautiful when the fields are covered up, and everything is black and white. It's like even the colours are hibernating.

On Saturday, two days after meeting Yakuwa-san, we drive to Pepan to where the woman named Hana Sumiyoshi took her life.

"It's so white, and lonely." I mumble while watching the snowscape roll by out the car window.

"Lonely? Why?"

"Why…? Well, because it's not a bright colour."

"That's not true at all. Do you know why snow is white?" Sakurako-san smiles without turning to look at me.

"Why it's white? Uhh…. I think it's because the air trapped inside reflects all the light… Or something like that."

"Yes, that's right. Snow appears white because it reflects the visible light from the sun. When all the colours are combined together, you see it as white. In other words, the white colour of snow could be considered the perfect colour." Sakurako-san laughs at the same time as His Excellency Diavel's laugh streams out of the car stereo, making her sound like a demon.

White is Sakurako-san's colour. It seems odd when you put it that way.

"Oh, but what about when it's blue?"

“It has to do with the density.” The reply comes from the back seat.

“Density… Like between snow and ice?”

I turn around to see Yakuwa-san doing some kind of work on a tablet.

“Yes. When the snow is dense, there’s less air inside, so the light can penetrate more deeply. The red light, which has a long wavelength, gets absorbed while the blue light, which has a short wavelength, gets reflected. I researched it when I wrote a piece about the icefall festival.”

“Oh, I see.”

The icefall festival is a snow and ice themed festival held every year in Souunkyou . Ice structures and tunnels are made using water from the Ishikari river in Souunkyou , where it gets extremely cold. At night, they light them up with all kinds of colours , but they’re mostly clear to blue-ish during the day. The conversation dies out.

“Um...”

“It’s okay, you don’t need to force a conversation. Just act like I’m not even here,” the reporter says while I try to think of some way to make the atmosphere in the car more bearable.

“But still…”

“He said not to worry, so don’t. Just leave him be.” Sakurako-san must think it’s more convenient this way.

It feels weird to be silently watched, like he’s a spy or something.

“…What kind of person was Sumiyoshi-san?”

“Her husband passed away quite young. She used to live in the centre of Asahikawa, but she got seriously ill, and moved to Pepan to be somewhere quieter.”

“By herself?”

The Pepan area is a lovely mixture of history and nature. Rather than being a typical suburb, it’s more like small villages consisting of scattered houses between fields, rice paddies, and barns along the Pepan river. They have names related to rice cultivation such as Toyota, Yonehara, and Mizuho.

“The Pepan area is trying to promote immigration. She opened a workshop here by herself.”

“A workshop?”

“Yeah. In addition to making and dyeing cloth with natural dyes, she does sericulture.”

“Sericulture?” For a moment, I don’t understand what he said.

“Sericulture is raising silkworms, then extracting the silk from their cocoons.”

“Oh! Silkworms!”

“Pepan was rich with mulberry trees, so it was developed by silkworm raising families who moved there from Fukushima. Pepan used to be one of Hokkaido’s leading silk producing areas.”

“Now that you mention it, I think I’ve heard that before.”

There’s a house with a thatched roof, which is unusual for Hokkaido. I’m curious about why, and later learn that it’s an old silkworm farmer’s house that’s been preserved.

“But… I wonder if there’s a relationship between the silkworm farming woman and the man who was in the accident…”

“Like the head. The police should have already looked into this,” Sakurako-san says shortly.

“You mean An Ichikawa’s head?”

Yakuwa-san, who has been staring at his tablet without being part of the conversation, lets out a deep sigh.

“…I don’t know much about her, either. However, she did go to a seasonal school in Niseko for two weeks 12 years ago.”

“Seasonal school?”

“It was a seasonal international school.”

“Ah, I see.”

Yakuwa-san raises his eyebrows at me as I repeat the unfamiliar words.

Niseko is like a foreign country within Hokkaido. A lot of foreign tourists stay there because of the high quality snow. English is spoken more than Japanese there. Even though the police officers at the police boxes are Japanese, they’re expected to be able to hold a conversation in English. It doesn’t feel like Japan. That’s how Niseko is. There’s nothing strange about opening a short term international

school there. But… It seems that the story isn't that simple. That's what Yakuwa-san says.

That girl called An left her hometown and spent two weeks living at a boarding house in Niseko to attend school. She was already 11 years old, so she was able to be by herself. The couple that ran the boarding house said that the parents seem to have thought they were sending their child abroad to study.

She was a friendly, obedient, and well mannered girl. After staying there for a week, she was already helping with cleaning and washing dishes. The couple never had children of their own, so they enjoyed treating her like their daughter. The following summer, they even sent a postcard to her inviting her to go visit. But the postcard was sent back because the recipient wasn't there.

"So she was already gone? But to transfer again in just one year…"

Yakuwa-san shakes his head. "The address that An Ichikawa gave to the couple wasn't real."

"What?"

They were confused, since it didn't seem to be a typo. She wasn't trying to get out of paying the lodging bill, either. No real harm was done. All that was left were questions and loneliness.

"Even now, that couple still talks about her in the summer. They contacted the international school, but only one of the teachers remembered her. They said she was a good kid, but…"

"But…?"

"It was 12 years ago. There's no reason why they should remember a student who was there for less than 2 weeks after that long, unless something was special about them."

Yakuwa-san leans forward and hands me a picture. It shows a girl in a yellow dress with a shy smile. She's standing in front of a white boarding house, surrounded by greenery.

"Oh?" Sakurako-san looks over at the picture when she stops at the next red light.

The girl has brown skin, and fluffy black hair, just like Sakurako-san deduced from the skull, but that's not the only thing that surprises me.

“She looks like she could be a model.”

She’s very beautiful. She has big, dark eyes, a straight nose, and dimples by her mouth. Her arms are long and slender, too. She looks older than 11. Her figure and demeanor make her look almost as mature as I am.

“So?”

“…You seem really interested in this, even though it isn’t about bones,” Yakuwa-san says, eyeing us up like he’s testing us.

“What? Are you still doubting us? You must be curious too, right? It’s natural for humans to want to know more about things. I don’t know why she died, so I want to find out. It’s human nature,” Sakurako-san says while she flares at the reporter through the rear view mirror.

“Even if they think about it, it’s rare for people to actually try to find out.” The reporter scoffs. Sakurako-san looks very displeased. I have a feeling that this trip is going to be difficult for me.

Eventually, the car arrives at the house. It’s next to a small shrine with an old, red torii gate. It’s a single story house with a rusty red roof. It seems to double as both a house and a store. There is a large, wooden sign attached to the dull white wall, right next to the sliding glass door.

“Hana Textiles Workshop”

Of course, it’s closed now. The snow hasn’t been shoveled, so it’s ankle high in front of the door. There are a few footprints through the snow, so maybe a manager or something has been by. For now, we head to the house nearby to see if anyone is in. It’s a white, 2 storey house, with the roof the same colour as the workshop’s. The house is next to a garage and 2 greenhouses, which might belong to the neighbours .

I watch Sakurako-san walk away from me with long steps, then turn to look at the reporter next to me. He looks at me and smiles. It seems more like a cold, scornful smile than a friendly one. I quickly try to catch up with Sakurako-san. There’s no need for us to use the intercom. As soon as we approach the house, I notice that the

garage door is open. There's an elderly woman inside, standing in front of a large, cream coloured pickling bucket. The woman moves three bowls of sweet smelling daikon pickles in sake lees. She makes no attempt to hide her suspicious expression.

"Excuse me, we'd like to ask about the workshop next door…"

"I have nothing to say."

I speak before Sakurako-san has the chance to say something rude, but the woman crumples her face even more.

"Anything is fine. Please just tell us what you know…"

"I don't know anything. It's just a nuisance. I never should have rented my house to them. I was against it from the beginning," the woman says in disgust, then heads to the entrance of her house.

"W-well, before she committed suicide, were there any signs? Or maybe a strange visitor?"

"If there was, I would have told them to go away!"

The woman glares at us for following her, then slams the door. The reporter frowns.

"Yakuwa, where did your information about the suicide come from?"

"A young man. Most likely this woman's son or grandson. He seemed like he was hoping for a reward."

"I wish you could have made an appointment to talk to someone in advance…"

"Why me?" The reporter just shrugs at my spiteful words.

Well, he has a point, but…

"Nothing we can do now. Sakurako-san, let's go back."

Sakurako-san shakes her head. "There's no need for that."

"Hm?"

Sakurako-san assumes a daunting stance in front of the door. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Wait… Sakurako-san?!"

Just as I expected, Sakurako-san shows no hesitation before she starts ringing the intercom repeatedly. Even the reporter, who is always so composed, looks at me with wide eyes as if to say "is she insane?!" Don't look at me! It's not my fault!

“Stop that! I’ll call the police!” The old woman’s voice trembles as she shouts through the speaker, clearly out of patience. She must feel angry and afraid of Sakurako-san, who’s acting so unhinged.

“Do whatever you want, but if you have a secret, all we have to do is ask a more loose-lipped family member. Wouldn’t it be smarter for you to tell us before we talk to someone who we can bribe?” Sakurako-san says into the intercom almost threateningly.

The reporter frowns again. He’s gone beyond shock, and is now looking at her with disdain, like he’s looking at something foul. Determined not to give in, Sakurako-san continues her barrage of intercom ringing as soon as the old woman stops talking.

“This is practically assault,” the reporter mutters.

It’s definitely not the smartest way to do things, and it’d be a problem if the police were called. We should really stop at this point… But just as I grab the sleeve of Sakurako-san’s coat, the door opens.

“It’s disgraceful to cause such a disturbance in front of someone’s front door.” The old woman greets us once again after finally running out of patience. Her face is red with anger.

“Thanks.”

“I won’t serve you tea.” She reluctantly lets Sakurako-san and I into the living room while making a point not to welcome us.

I just realized we should really have brought some snacks or something as a gift. The house is decorated with oil paintings by artists I don’t know, and has been beautifully restored. The ceilings are low, however, and it smells old, like incense sticks.

“So, what do you want to know?” She says as she sits on the couch while glaring at us, not even trying to hide the fact that we’re bothering her.

“Um… To start with, how did you end up lending your house to Sumiyoshi-san in the first place?”

She furrows her brow deeply at the question.

“How… Well, it’s not like I wanted to lend it to her.”

The old woman tells us the story. One day her son, who was involved in immigrant support movements, said he wanted to lend his house to immigrants. His little sister’s house was vacant, as she

had passed away a few years ago. Nobody had any plans to use the house, and if it was left empty, it would fall into disrepair. They'd make some extra money from charging rent, too.

"Well… It's not like I was against the textile workshop or silkworms. My parents raised silkworms, too. The sound of the silkworms rustling around while eating the mulberry leaves at night was like a lullaby for me as a child."

However, she had doubts about whether a job like that would make a profit. She could purchase wool for cheap from an acquaintance, but didn't know what to do about the dye or cloth. But thanks to the internet, she earned enough money to live peacefully on her own for a while.

"I figured that whoever was renting it could help me during the busy season, too… Looking back now, it was definitely a mistake." The woman signs with regret.

"Did she do something wrong before she passed away?"

"No. She was only there for about 2 years, but she never missed a rental payment, or had any men over. She didn't have any pets or children, either, so I thought everything would be fine…"

Seeing how the woman is just venting her frustrations now, Sakurako-san signals her to hurry up and get to the point.

"Did Sumiyoshi-san not have any family?"

"I guess not? Someone she said was her distant relative came over to check in on her sometimes, but… I got the feeling that they didn't really know each other that well."

Sumiyoshi-san's body wasn't found until a week after her death, probably because she didn't get many visitors, and didn't talk to anyone. Fortunately the heating was off, so the body didn't decompose as quickly as it could have, but it also meant she wasn't discovered as quickly. It's often a cause for concern if someone doesn't have people over, but not always.

"Due to the circumstances, we've left her loom and all her furniture the way they were. My son is looking for someone she knows to take it."

For two years, a few customers came to visit here and there, but she had no close friends over. The woman says that she thinks

Sumiyoshi-san probably took her life because she was lonely. She did sometimes help when the woman was busy, she rarely interacted with the woman's family. Nobody knew she was in trouble, and she left a note on her phone saying "I'm sorry," so the police chalked it up to suicide.

"I've finally moved past it, so I don't want you sniffing around and bringing up trouble again. She didn't kill herself because she had a bad relationship with me, or anything."

"I have one last question for you. Where did she hang herself?" Sakurako-san suddenly says, breaking the silence.

"What?"

"Did she tie the rope to a beam somewhere? Or did she use a doorknob?"

"Ah… The police said it looked like she tried to use a curtain rod first, but failed."

The curtain rod was found all bent and broken, apparently.

"She put the rope over the back of her pipe bed. I really wish she'd said something before doing that…"

"So it was an atypical hanging… Was it really suicide?"

"The police said so, so it must be true, right?"

"Right, but… When you opened the door, the doll immediately fell over. If it was leaning against the door, then it was probably suicide, right? Like a locked room kind of thing."

The woman shoos us out of the house, saying "okay, that's enough." She definitely doesn't want to talk about it anymore, and she probably doesn't like remembering the body.

"Lend us the key, then. I want to take a look inside."

"What?"

"We won't bother you or cause any trouble. I just want to see inside."

"You've bothered me enough already."

Despite the answer the old woman gave, it's clear from the intercom incident that Sakurako-san won't back down. She glares hard at Sakurako-san.

"Why do you even want to investigate this?"

“There was an incident on the same day that caused the death of a man with an unknown identity. If nothing changes, his bones will be buried in a public cemetery… It’s possible that Sumiyoshi knew him somehow.”

“Sumiyoshi-san did?” The old woman gives Sakurako-san a suspicious scowl, then looks at the reporter and I before giving a defeated sigh. “…I suppose it would be sad to have no one to tend your grave.” The woman gets up from the couch, then returns with a single key. There’s no keychain, just a simple, silver key.

“I appreciate it. We’ll return it soon.” Sakurako-san thanks the woman with a wide smile as she takes the key, then promptly leaves the house.

The reporter and I politely thank the old woman before following Sakurako-san out. By the time the old woman closes the door, Sakurako-san is already standing in front of the workshop’s entrance. The reporter clicks his tongue loudly as we walk over. It feels like the situation is getting worse by the minute. I let out a deep sigh.

Part 4

As the sliding door creaks open, the scent of dust and mold wafts through the chilled winter air. The light shining through the crack in the door lights up the dust, making it glitter. Sakurako-san snorts as she steps through that light without any hesitation.

“Smells like mold.”

“That’s what happens when nobody lives in a place for a whole year.”

The living space right next to the entrance appears to have been used as a workshop. We take off our shoes near the entrance. The floor creaks as we walk down the hallway toward the workshop. I can see a large loom, and a dusty spinning wheel that looks like the one from sleeping beauty.

“…Unfinished,” Sakurako-san murmurs.

“Hm?”

“This cloth. It’s not complete,” she mutters as she approaches the loom.

Just as she said, there's a textile with a beautiful geometric pattern left behind, probably about half finished.

"If it were me, I would have finished this before I died."

"Maybe it was a sudden impulse."

"Then what caused that impulse?"

Sakurako-san stares at the cloth and thread for a moment with a grim expression on her face. The reporter puts on a mask and watches us. It's hard to tell what expression he's making when half of his face is covered, but I'm certain that he isn't smiling.

I take another look around the room. The walls are covered in pieces of cloth, and framed photos of sheep, silkworms, and flowers. There are also dried flowers and branches from shrubs all over the place. The cloth is pale, probably from being dyed with vegetable dyes. The soft shading makes it look still. It feels like I'm in a forest during fall or winter. There's some kind of withered, crumbling thing in a planter by the window. It probably used to be mint. It still smells slightly cool, even though it's so dry.

"...She must have been really lonely, living here all by herself."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, it's just quiet."

"If she felt like it, she could easily go to a busy part of the city. It's probably only quiet around here because it's the off season for farmers. Besides, quiet is always better than noise."

Maybe Sakurako-san is right, and she was just feeling lonely because it's winter. Still, I feel an indescribable sense of isolation in this room. The walls are covered with pictures of living things, but… I don't feel any life from them.

"It reminds me of your living room, Sakurako-san."

"It does? Why?" Sakurako-san frowns and looks around the room suspiciously. I hope she isn't expecting to see a skeleton somewhere in here.

"...What do you think, reporter?"

He has been leaning against the door, watching us this whole time.

"You're asking me?" His eyes widen slightly from surprise at being asked a question. "...I'm not one to make assumptions. My job

is to simply record the facts."

"Right… Sorry."

It's a bit awkward when he responds with such a sound argument. I feel stupid for even asking now. I expected him to mock me, but he just says, "there's no need to apologize."

The reporter looks at Sakurako-san and asks, "so, what are you going to do now?"

"Is the room where she died further back? I want to see it."

Having not found anything interesting in the living room, Sakurako-san points at the other end of the room. It's a door leading to the kitchen. The reporter narrows his eyes as he watches Sakurako-san walk away. I wonder if he's thinking that we won't learn anything, since the body is already long gone.

The door hasn't been used in a long time, so it creaks loudly as she turns the knob. Sakurako-san pushes her weight against the door to force it open. Maybe the door is heavier than I thought.

"…"

A rush of cold, damp air comes from the room. Besides the scent of dust and mold, the year old scent of death still lingers in the air.

"That's where she tried to hang herself first." Sakurako-san mutters while looking around the room.

The curtain rod for the window next to the bed is bent, and the metal fittings have fallen off.

"It seems like she really did want to die," Sakurako-san mumbles.

"With a typical hanging, all you have to do is take that first step. With an atypical hanging, your body is on the floor, so it takes a strong will to resist the urge to save yourself."

Sakurako-san looks at the curtain rod, then at the floor where the carpet has been cut away. As expected, the mattress and such have been thrown out already. All that's left is the bed frame and the curtains, which have been tossed onto the empty bed frame. Sakurako-san picks them up, checks to make sure that there's nothing on or under them, then takes a deep breath.

“Human survival instincts surpass emotions, like in the double suicide case where the couple threw themselves into the ocean and tore at each other in an attempt to survive. She must have had a strong desire to die, since she still completed an atypical hanging after already tasting the fear of a failed attempt.”

“That’s true…”

The human body does whatever it can to avoid death.

“Even if you’re in the depths of despair, it still takes a strong will to kill yourself… Like pushing a heavy wheel up a steep hill.”

Every time I think back to my time with that suicide group, I feel haunted by these indescribable feelings. I remember the conflict they felt between their instincts to survive and their desire to die.

“That makes sense. It’s no easier to commit murder just because you’re the victim.”

“I wonder why she suddenly felt like she wanted to die?”

Sakurako-san slowly nods at me, then crosses her arms as she thinks. The light from the window illuminates her from behind. I look at the reporter, not really expecting an answer. He tilts his head slightly to the side.

“I’m not sure, but… Sumiyoshi-san used to suffer from a serious illness. She seems to have beat her illness, but maybe she was still vaguely anxious about it.”

“Would you kill yourself over some vague anxiety?”

“There could be some inconsistencies because of her fears. Not everyone is completely sure of themselves like you are.”

“I’m not sure of myself. I just know that I have extraordinary abilities,” Sakurako-san calmly replies to the reporter’s rude comment. She starts turning the house upside down as she investigates.

If this were a video game, their friendship level would definitely go down. I can see the deep wrinkles in the reporter’s brow, but it’s too late to do anything about it now. I’m sure their friendship level was already as low as it could possibly be, anyway. Right now, I have to deal with Sakurako-san.

“Of course she’d make a mess of the room…” I hurry to try and stop her, but she gives me a puzzled look.

“But it isn’t here.”

“What isn’t?”

“The doll.”

“Oh.”

Now that she mentions it, she’s right. We came here in the first place because of the headless doll. Just as Sakurako-san says, there’s no doll to be found in this room.

“They said the doll fell over as soon as the door was opened…”

Just in case, I leave the room and look around at the door, living room, and kitchen, but I don’t find anything.

“We should have asked the old woman about it…”

I don’t know much about the market price for French dolls like that, but I can’t imagine they’re cheap. Even with the head missing, the victim’s family would likely want to keep it, or bury it with Sumiyoshi-san.

“There’s another room over here,” the reporter calls from down the hallway.

It’s next to the living room, straight across from the entrance. It doesn’t seem to be a kitchen or bathroom. Sakurako-san and I head to the last room like the reporter said . The sunny room seems to have been used for silkworms, since there’s several insect cages sitting on the wooden floor. I cautiously peek into one of the cages, but there’s no silkworms inside. I’m oddly relieved.

“You’re not good with bugs?” The reporter asks after hearing my sigh of relief.

“No… I just thought it’d be sad if they were all dead inside.”

I’d feel bad for them if all the little lives inside the insect cages ended due to Sumiyoshi-san’s death. I’m really glad that’s not the case. It may just be because the old woman next door already cleaned it up.

“Oh!” As I look around the room, I notice two dolls on a shelf that’s high on the wall, near the ceiling. “...These aren’t the right dolls, are they?”

“They seem handmade.”

The reporter shakes his head as I point out the dolls. They’re the emperor and empress hina dolls, but their kimono are pure white

without any decorations. Since this was a woman's house, it's not strange to have a few dolls. The only other things in the room are wool and work equipment. Nothing that resembles a headless doll. Sakurako-san immediately gives up and goes back to the bedroom where the body was discovered. She sits next to the bed, trying to see the world the corpse would have.

"D-Did you figure anything out?" My voice shakes slightly.

Sakurako-san's lack of hesitation before superimposing herself with the dead frightens me a little. I can't explain it well, but it's like I'm overcome with anxiety that I'll lose her in the same way. However, Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head.

"I just… Don't understand why the doll was missing its head. If you wanted to die while the doll was staring at you, wouldn't you want it to have eyes?"

"But since the doll was leaning against the door, it has to have been suicide, right?"

"Well… I guess so."

Sakurako-san seems to be struggling to get up off the floor, so I offer her my hand. Her hand feels warm in mine. I feel relieved to be reminded that she's still alive.

"So you've come into her house uninvited. Now what?" The reporter says with his usual narrow-eyed smile. Sakurako-san huffs.

"First of all, let's go talk to that neighbour about the doll again. We can talk about what's next after that."

After checking all of the other rooms, we still can't find the headless doll, so we have no choice but to ask the old woman about it while we return the key.

"Huh? You mean the headless doll? Everyone said it was creepy, so I don't think anyone took it…"

"Do you know anything else about the dolls?"

"I think she had Oshinmei-sama on display, but… I don't think she collected them or anything."

"Oshinmei-sama?"

"Yeah."

"It's also called Oshira-sama. It's a folk belief in the Tohoku region related to sericulture," Sakurako-san adds.

I feel like I've heard of Oshira-sama before.

"Yes, but that's about it… Ah, but speaking of dolls… When someone mentions dolls in this area, it's usually about blue eyed dolls."

"...Blue eyed dolls? What're those?"

"Back in the days of war and all that, American soldiers gave one to Pepan. I don't think young people know much about it these days."

"Do you mean the celluloid doll from the nursery rhyme?"

Come to think of it, I think I have heard of a nursery rhyme about a doll with blue eyes. However, the woman shakes her head.

"No, it's different from that… It's a bit complicated, so why don't you go visit the library at the elementary school? I saw a newspaper article a few years ago about it. They should have documents about it, and the actual doll is there. That girl said that she sewed a dress for the doll before."

I don't know if this blue eyed doll is related to our investigation or not, but at least it's a start. The old woman has no idea where the headless doll went, but she says that she'll ask as soon as her family is back. Not wanting to cause her any more trouble, we take our leave from her home.

"What should we do?"

This area is mostly dairy farms. The farmers here all know each other well. If An Ichikawa lived around here, she definitely would have stood out, so we probably would have heard about her.

"For now, let's take a look at that library," Sakurako-san says. Her words leave a white cloud in the air.

Sumiyoshi-san passed away during the coldest season. The town is painted in muted colours . I feel a chill as I think about what Sumiyoshi-san was thinking as she died one year ago while looking at this same scenery. Was it loneliness?

"...That's a pretty old shrine, huh? …Or maybe it's a hokora ."

On the way back to the car, I suddenly notice a red torii that's rotting and looks like it's about to fall over. I tell Sakurako-san and the reporter that I'm just going to take a quick look, but they come with me. I pass under the torii while being careful not to slip in the

snow, and stand in front of the small shrine with no offering box that's buried beneath the snow. The door is tightly shut. I have to google what kind of shrine it is on my phone.

"Enshrined here are Emperor Jinmu, and… Himetataraisuzu-Hime-no-Mikoto. It says 'tatara' here, which seems to have something to do with iron manufacturing?"

Tatara refers to a type of furnace that was used in ancient Japan for smelting iron.

"I'm not sure. I know that Himetataraisuzu-Hime-no-Mikoto was Emperor Jinmu's wife, though." Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders at my question.

"If I remember correctly, the story goes that her father, Ōmononushi (or Kotoshironushi) took the form of a red arrow or a wani to impregnate her mother. Since she was struck by the arrow in the hoto, the daughter was named Hototatara-Isusuki-Hime, but the daughter didn't like her name so she changed it."

"I see…"

Sakurako-san grins at me. She can tell I'm just nodding along without really understanding. "Hoto refers to female genitalia, by the way."

"What's with the wani (crocodile)?" I ask Yakuwa-san as I feel my cheeks turn red.

"Oh, it's sometimes called a 'same' (shark)."

"Either way, it was an interspecies marriage."

An interspecies marriage…

"Yeah, but it's not an uncommon element in myths. There's Zeus taking the form of a swan, the princess and the frog, and even an Inuit legend about a woman who marries a crab. Ainu mythology in particular has a lot of stories about gods who are animals. They often choose humans as spouses, bringing them both wealth and calamity."

"What about butterflies? There was that story about the doll created from a relationship between a human and a butterfly."

I remember it from the backstory behind that butterfly girl doll

"I'm not sure about butterflies, but I don't think silkworms are too uncommon. They're often worshiped by families who raise

silkworms. Oshira-sama, who is worshiped in Tohoku, is depicted as a woman riding a horse while wearing a crown of silkworms. It's said that a woman fell in love with her pet horse, and they became husband and wife. Her father killed the horse in a fit of rage, and the woman rode up to Heaven on the horse's back. After that, the girl who was now a goddess stood by her parents' bedside and taught them knowledge about sericulture. Didn't the victim worship Oshimei-sama?"

I'm reminded of that little, white doll.

"I see, so that's what kind of god Oshira-sama is."

It doesn't seem like this shrine is connected to Oshinmei-sama , though. It's so desolate that it feels like the Gods here have been forgotten.

"The little torii here is pretty nice, though."

It's evidence that many people lived here in the past. The red torii gate and the house with a dark red roof that has lost its occupants makes me feel like I can't even breathe too loudly. After looking at them quietly for a moment, we leave.

Part 5

It only takes a few minutes to drive to the library. It's snowing a lot, so there are lots of red and yellow snow shovels placed next to the door.

"Oh."

There's handmade posters about the local area on a bulletin board, and a humidifier spewing white steam. As soon as we walk through the front door, there's a doll staring at us from a glass case. It's an antique "toy" with shiny skin, like one of those French dolls. It seems like the kind of thing you shouldn't touch, unlike the Butterfly Maiden doll. This tiny doll looks like it would absorb childrens' vitality and attack someone. Its hair doesn't look very high quality, and its face has gotten dull over time. It's just the right size for a young girl to hold in her arms. It looks more like it was meant to be played with than displayed.

"This doll is… Victoria Anne?"

There's another doll inside the case wearing a hand knit dress and hat, staring at us with big, round eyes. Above that doll is an article written by a different company from a few years ago.

"Blue eyed friendship doll…"

There were 12 739 blue eyed dolls given to Japanese children by America in 1927 as a sign of friendship. The dolls were given to elementary school and kindergarten aged kids all across Japan, where they were loved and cherished. In return, Japan sent their own dolls to America in hopes of fostering friendship between the children of both countries.

However, that was tossed aside when the Pacific war started. During that time, children were taught that America was evil, and all the dolls sent by them were supposed to be destroyed. Victoria Anne, the doll given to Pepan, was no exception. They probably couldn't bring themselves to destroy the charming doll that closes its eyes when lying down and cries for its mom when waking up. The principal of the elementary school at the time knew the danger, but still hid it in the back of a cupboard to keep it safe. It was forgotten about for decades until the school merged with another elementary school, and it was discovered by some teachers 50 years after it was hidden. The doll was given back to the children as a sign of peace, and a memory of the sadness of war.

It's now being kept with other materials from its time in the library where the school used to be, according to the article. This is the first time I've heard this sad story. Something is bothering me about this.

"Anne… Huh?"

"Anne comes from Saint Anne, the mother of the virgin Mary. It's not an unusual name, and it's a relatively easy name to use in Japanese, so I don't think it has any real significance," Sakurako-san says. She's probably thinking the same thing as I am.

"Anyway, this doll doesn't look anything like the doll found at the crime scene, but it was still found in Pepan…"

This doll named Victoria Anne was being kept in the same area as where Hana Sumiyoshi-san and An Ichikawa were. Dolls are toys made to look like humans. Is it really just a complete coincidence?

“It says they have archived materials from that time period, so let’s ask if we can see them,” Yakuwa-san says as he heads into the library.

The bright, quiet library is kept heated so that visitors stay warm. The librarian nods slightly as we enter, as if to say “welcome.” The library has books from every genre, as well as books about Hokkaido and the local area. We search around for books related to the blue eyed doll, but we don’t find anything noteworthy. Yakuwa-san gives up and asks the librarian.

“The person in charge of the reference room isn’t here on weekends…” she says with a confused look, like it’s obvious.

“We don’t need anything fancy. We just need to see the documents. Get them for us,” Sakurako-san says in her usual point-blank manner.

Yakuwa-san makes a sour expression and lightly nudges Sakurako-san with his elbow.

“What?”

“Can’t you phrase that a little nicer?”

The librarian gives in to Sakurako-san’s demands and calls the person on their day off, then goes to the reference room to look for what we need. The reporter loses his patience and scolds Sakurako-san in a hushed voice.

“Is there a problem?” Sakurako-san looks puzzled and annoyed, so the reporter looks at me like he expects me to say something to her.

“Yeah, well… She’s always like that.”

I don’t think it’s good, either, but it’s normal for her. The reporter sighs in frustration. Fortunately, the librarian doesn’t look too bothered. She quickly gathers up several files, albums, and small boxes, then lines them up on the table. She can’t give us any detailed explanations about them, but just being able to see them is enough for us. We carefully look over each of the items she brought out.

I had no idea before, but there were several hundred blue eyed dolls spread around Japan besides the one here in Pepan. There are 26 left in Hokkaido, including one named Fannie Pio-chan that’s

being displayed in Sapporo's clock tower. Records of events where the dolls have been displayed, records of how the dolls came from America, related books, letters written by children… Everything has been carefully preserved and stored.

The clothes we heard about from Hana Sumiyoshi-san's landlord are being stored in a box alongside other clothes for the doll. Among all the clothes that people have made over the years, the one she made looks newer. It's dyed a pale cherry blossom pink colour. It was probably made from cloth that Hana-san made and dyed herself. After looking at the clothes, I start looking through the files until a particular envelope catches my eye. Inside is what appears to be an appendix from a magazine containing a drawing from an old shoujo manga.

"I'm glad Anne-chan came back."

The letter looks like it has been stored with great care. It looks like a young child wrote it, needing to put in a lot of effort to write each letter.

"...Heheh."

I can't help but smile when I see the drawing of Victoria Anne wearing a cute dress. I take a look at the envelope itself, but then I notice something that makes me freeze.

Year 1, class 1, Chika Ichikawa.

"Ichikawa…"

There's no doubt about it. It says "Chika Ichikawa." I don't know exactly how many people have the last name Ichikawa, but only one person comes to mind right now. As far as I know, it's not an overly common name. I turn the envelope over, and see that it was written roughly 40 years ago.

"Hey, Sakurako-san…"

Sakurako-san is looking over a file next to me, so I tug on her sleeve. She notices it, too, and nods with a serious expression.

"This one, too. This 'Chika Ichikawa' woman went to Iowa as a goodwill ambassador. They're probably the same person."

“Iowa?”

“The Japanese doll given as a return gift called ‘Miss Hokkaido’ is kept there,” Yakuwa-san answers.

I think it’s safe to say that they’re the same person, rather than two people with the same first and last names. When she was in her first year of elementary school, the little girl fell in love with a doll. When she grew up, she traveled to the country the doll came from as an ambassador to give one in return. It’s a pretty nice story.

“Is Ichikawa a common name around here?”

“Hm? Um… I’m not sure? I’ve never really heard anything about it.” The librarian tilts her head to the side at the abrupt question.

“Do you know where this Ichikawa woman is, then?”

“Huh? Even if I did…”

Sakurako-san keeps ordering around the confused librarian. “As soon as possible, please.”

“Ah, geez! There’s no point in pressuring the poor librarian!” Yakuwa-san forces himself between the librarian and Sakurako-san, who is looming over her intimidatingly. “There’s no way she could tell you without the person’s permission, anyway.”

“You’re in the way,” Sakurako-san says with an indignant expression as Yakuwa-san tries to make her back down.

I feel a sting in my chest as I watch the two of them argue. That’s usually my job. I gradually start to feel irritated that someone I barely know is leaving me out.

In the end, the librarian was kind enough to have someone who might know Chika Ichikawa contact us later. We thank her as we leave the library.

“Honestly, is that how you always act when you’re playing detective?!”

I didn’t think he was a very emotional person, but apparently the reporter does get angry.

“When it comes to bones, she’s incredibly focused. This is how it goes with things she’s not interested in, though.”

Yakuwa-san looks over his shoulder at me, annoyed. I reply to him in a low voice so he doesn't hear the displeasure in my voice.

"Besides… We usually visit bereaved family members. It's relatively easy to get them to share their story."

It's always sad visiting families that have lost a loved one. I always feel a sense of guilt when I listen to them. Sometimes I feel like I'm going to drown amidst the meandering words, tears, and occasional anger. What I've learned from all the families I've visited is that no matter what their initial reaction is, they're always willing to talk about it earnestly in the end.

"Everyone wants to talk. If your loved one was sick, for example, you can go visit them in the hospital before they pass, so it's easier to accept. It's hard to agree with the police's explanation."

The families talk to us for a variety of reasons. Some want to protect their own dignity, deny hurtful accusations that have been made about them, or to find answers that they wouldn't be able to find on their own. Even if it means wrenching open their wounds and allowing fresh blood to spill out.

Yakuwa-san nods at my explanation. "In the end, all humans want an answer that makes sense to them, rather than the truth. Or they just want someone to hate."

"What do you mean?"

"It's better to have someone else you can hate. Otherwise, you'll end up hating yourself."

"…"

I feel like this is the first time I've heard someone say that it's a good thing to hate someone. I especially didn't expect to hear it from Yakuwa-san. I thought he was more aloof than that.

"Ah, wait! Please stop!"

Sakurako-san starts up the car, since she has no interest in our conversation. As the engine starts, the librarian runs towards us.

"Sakurako-san!"

At almost the same instant that I call out, the car comes to a sudden stop. I look out the passenger seat window. The librarian hurries over with her phone in her hand.

“Oh, thank goodness. This isn’t about Ichikawa-san, but a girl who used to work here up until last year knows more about dolls than I do. I asked her, and she said she doesn’t mind talking to you.”

That’s a rather unexpected suggestion. We don’t have any other leads to follow. We head out to meet with this other librarian in hopes of learning something new.

Part 6

We agree to meet up at the only cafe in the area. It’s one of those farmhouse cafes. They serve healthy food made with local ingredients, and vegetables they grew themselves. It has the atmosphere of an old Japanese-style house. It’s heated with a wood stove, which is fogging up the windows with its warm air. The table is made of a deep-coloured wood, and the coasters are woven. There’s a small vase with red berries that look like those from a heavenly bamboo plant. At this time of year, the menu is centred around root vegetables that store well.

We still have time until we’re supposed to meet, so we decide to eat here first. Today’s lunch is a sweet and salty simmered saury, with a mizuna salad, shredded and fried pumpkin, boiled potatoes, and adzuki bean rice. It’s both nutritious and delicious, but it’s not enough food for me. Sakurako-san is being picky, like usual. The reporter doesn’t seem to have much of an appetite, so he doesn’t eat much of his rice.

I expected the mood between the three of us to be tense, but it’s not as bad as I expected. It’s probably because Sakurako-san asked Yakuwa-san if it was okay to eat here beforehand. At first, the reporter thought she was just asking about what he likes and doesn’t like. I thought the same at first, so I was surprised to realize that she was asking for permission. He finally understood when Sakurako-san said, “I heard you grew up in Egypt.”

Egypt has a large muslim population. She was worried that Yakuwa-san had religious restrictions. Sake and mirin are often used in Japanese food, but they’re forbidden in Islam.

“I didn’t think you cared about things like that.”

“I’m not religious, and I don’t believe in any God, but I’m in the minority, globally speaking. I don’t care if you worship a sardine’s head, or a rock you found on the ground. I won’t criticize someone based on the backbones of their life. Faith is a personal freedom,” Sakurako-san says with a smile.

Yakuwa-san is surprised. He seems to think Sakurako-san is acting arrogant at first, but I can tell he likes her a little better now.

“This case is rather messy. An Ichikawa, Chika Ichikawa, and Victoria Anne - I don’t know how they’re connected to Hana Sumiyoshi, but I think it’s safe to say that there’s some relation between them,” Sakurako-san says while she eats her pumpkin dango for dessert.

“I think your judgment is a little too hasty, but I agree that it is messy.”

The reporter politely holds a cup of after-meal tea in his hands, and blows on the steam. I try to put on an intellectual expression and pretend like I’m thinking while I sip my tea. The menu said it was a blend of kumazasa and roasted green tea, but I honestly can’t tell the difference from normal green tea.

Meanwhile, the time of our appointment is approaching. 15 minutes before the appointed time, the person we’re meeting arrives at the shop. She’s a plump woman who looks to be in her 20s. “Hello!” she suddenly calls out to us, waving and smiling. She seems like a nice person. She’s a former librarian who was also in charge of administrative work for the Doll Preservation Society.

“Sorry for making you come out here to meet us.”

“You can call me Shimada. Don’t worry about it, I left my kid with my mom. I’m actually glad to have a break, honestly. This was a good excuse,” Shimada-san says as she takes her seat.

We thank her, then move to the reason for our meeting.

“We wanted to ask you about a doll.” I take the lead with Yakuwa-san watching over me to prevent Sakurako-san from getting violent.

“Yeah, the blue-eyed ghost doll, right?” Shimada-san says after taking a sip of orange juice.

“...Ghost?”

“Sorry, I just call it that. It’s not an official name or anything.”

Yakuwa-san and I can’t help but glance at each other. Shimada-san bursts out laughing.

“So why do you call it a ghost?” Sakurako-san asks calmly as she sits with her arms crossed.

“Um… Could you please keep this a secret?” Shimada-san asks while exchanging looks with each of us. Yakuwa-san promises to at least not reveal where he got the information if he writes about it in an article. “When it was decided that the doll would be on display about 4 years ago, it went missing for a week.”

“...Missing?” Yakuwa-san repeats in a suspicious voice after turning on his IC recorder with Shimada-san’s permission.

“That’s right. It’s a peculiar doll. It has historical value, but it’s not worth much as a product. Someone who doesn’t know its historical value would just think it’s an old, worn out doll. You saw how it was displayed at the front of the library without any real security, right?”

It’s true. The librarian said she didn’t know much about it, either.

“It was a big deal when that doll disappeared! Well, some people thought so, and some didn’t. Some people said it might have just gotten lost with all the other stuff, so nobody called the police right away.”

“And then… You found it eventually?” Sakurako-san asks suspiciously.

“A week later, it suddenly showed up in a box. It was like it came back by itself! But that couldn’t possibly have happened. Dolls don’t move on their own,” Shimada-san says with a shrug. “I think someone must have taken it during all the chaos, then tried to return it once it was decided it’d be put on display.”

“Someone else who has been working with dolls for a lot longer than me said that since it came back safe, we should just forget about the whole disappearing thing. They said not to go looking for the culprit. Since that doll is a symbol of peace, people might forget her history.”

Since she was actually there, she does a good job of explaining the chaos at the time. The dolls themselves were cheap, mass produced items. They were made of hardened wood shavings, rather than ceramic or synthetic resin. Nothing was done about the incident because there would be no point in stealing it to sell.

"But it's weird."

"Weird how?"

"The Doll Preservation Society disbanded right after the theft incident. Weird, right?" Shimada-san says with her eyebrows raised as she takes a sip of orange juice. "Having the doll put in the library was apparently supposed to be the end of our activities as a group… But since it happened so suddenly… There were rumours about it. I did some investigating in secret… And it turned out that the doll wasn't the same."

"...What?"

"Besides the friendship doll, there was another doll we got as a commemorative gift from a delegation in Iowa that also went missing. That one still hasn't turned up, and-"

Sakurako-san leans forward, as if to ask, "and what?"

"Well… One of the people from the delegation was a school official who turned out to be embezzling money. They returned the money as soon as they were caught, so it was never made public. I think the reason why the group disbanded was to cover up the embezzlement incident." Shimada-san lets out a dissatisfied sigh. "They say that the missing doll must have been sold off. Those dolls must be laughing at us…" Shimada-san says in an exasperated tone.

I feel like the momentum of the conversation is forcing me to nod in agreement.

"What's the name of the person who was embezzling money?"

"I don't think I should say… I've already quit working at the library, so I don't think I should say too much." Shimada-san gives a vague answer to Sakurako-san's straightforward question.

So it's not that she doesn't know, but rather that she either isn't allowed to say it, or it's hard for her to say it.

“We won’t cause any trouble for you.” Sakurako-san won’t give up without an answer. “You’re actually curious about it, aren’t you? That’s why you decided to tell us all of this. How about we report back to you if we learn anything. How does that sound?” Sakurako-san smiles and waits for an answer. She looks like a devil tempting her victim. Her quiet laugh reminds me of His Excellency Diavel.

“...” Shimada-san looks at her half glass of juice, then up at the wooden beams on the ceiling. She stays silent, like she’s conflicted.

Sakurako-san tilts her head and asks, “what will you do?”

That’s just the push Shimada-san needs. She straightens herself in her chair, like she’s come to a decision.

“I don’t know exactly who it is for sure… A large group went together, so it’s hard to pin it down to just one person…”

It wouldn’t be impossible, but some people might have gone along that weren’t recorded anywhere…

“I don’t think I can help much,” she adds.

“I see. Let’s try a different question, then. Do you know a woman called ‘Chika Ichikawa’? There was a letter she wrote when she was very young in one of the files. There was also evidence that she went to America.”

“Ichikawa-san?” Shimada-san nods.

I’m a little surprised at seeing her so openly show her discomfort after she’s been so friendly.

“We’re looking for a different young woman named An Ichikawa. She may be of african american descent, and is likely around your age.”

The question doesn’t seem to bring anything to mind. Shimada-san tilts her head.

“Let’s see… I don’t know anything about someone my age, but I’ve heard about Chika Ichikawa-san. She was an unusual woman who loved Victoria Anne as a child, and she was a very talented woman. She went to America for a delegation, not to study abroad.” Despite praising her, there’s a hint of disgust in Shimada-san’s voice.

“I’d like to know more about that woman.”

“I don’t really know any details, either. She was kind of like an idol for elderly people who are interested in dolls. I’ve never actually

met her.”

“Who would know more details?”

“Well… I don’t work there anymore…”

“Anything is fine, we need to hear everything. Please tell us.”

“...”

Shimada-san holds her glass in her hand, refusing to speak despite Sakurako-san urging her to continue. She swirls the ice in her nearly empty glass with her straw. Soon, she glances upward at us.

“...Um… I seriously don’t know much, okay?”

“Anything you can tell us is fine.”

“Fine, just a little bit then,” Shimada-san prefaces her story. Her cheeks are somewhat red, but out of embarrassment, not anger. Sakurako-san certainly appears cool and attractive, even to someone of the same gender.

“Well… Stories about her just seemed to spontaneously come up once in a while. I don’t really know how to explain it, but… There was this lingering feeling like she was taboo to bring up around people from the preservation society.”

“Taboo?” Yakuwa-san, who has been leaving the investigation to Sakurako-san while he takes notes on his tablet, raises his head.

“Yeah, that’s right. It was like there was some unspoken rule not to talk about her… I think she must have gotten into some huge trouble or something…”

“So it would be difficult to get into contact with Chika Ichikawa herself?”

“Of course that’s impossible,” Shimada-san says as she bursts out laughing.

“Impossible?”

“Well, yeah. Ichikawa-san passed away over 10 years ago, now.”

Part 7

While Yakuwa-san and I say goodbye to Shimada-san, Sakurako-san is lost in thought.

“So Chika Ichikawa… Was she An-san’s mother?”

I urge Sakurako-san to leave the store.

“I can’t say for sure, but there does seem to be some connection between them. I haven’t seen a connection between the American doll and the original doll… According to Shimada, Chika Ichikawa studied abroad in America for some time. It’s possible that she had a child back then,” Sakurako-san says before glancing at her wristwatch. “There’s still much we don’t know about Hana Sumiyoshi. We’re running out of time, so I think we should head to Ashibetsu. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll go with you, of course. You’re free to act however you’d like, but… I’d appreciate it if you used a bit more moderation,” the reporter replies.

Sakurako-san bursts out laughing at him. “The word ‘moderation’ doesn’t exist in my dictionary.”

“Then how about I write it on your cheek?”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to see it.”

“You never look at yourself in the mirror, do you?”

“Do you think I’m the kind of woman who has to constantly make sure of who she is?”

“…”

The reporter tightly furrows his brow, and mutters something under his breath - probably an insult. He gets into Sakurako-san’s car without another word. I consider telling him that he doesn’t have to come if he doesn’t like it, but I decide not to. Mostly because I don’t want to be secretly monitored. I’ve also gradually grown to not hate the reporter as much, though. I’ve gotten so used to Sakurako-san that I appreciate his reluctance and confusion.

When I check the car navigation system, it’s just past 2pm. Yakuwa-san is still staying silent, and Sakurako-san doesn’t like unnecessary conversation, so we just listen to Diavel. The warmth and security of the car compared to the cold outside is making me feel sleepy.

I’m not happy that the reporter mistook us for criminals, but having him searching for scales left on us by Hanabusa’s butterflies is a lot better than being chased by Hanabusa’s ghost. He’s scary, but he’s not dangerous.

I must have dozed off, because I suddenly wake up to find we're in Ashibetsu. Ashibetsu is the town next to Asahikawa. It used to be a very prosperous coal mining town referred to as "the northern capital." It used to be a big tourist destination with the Dai Kannon statue, 5-storied pagoda, and a hotel named after Sanjusangen-do. The town is lined with flashy buildings from the bubble era, and a monorail used to run through it, but all these buildings have been bought by religious groups and closed down, so it's a quiet town now.

There's a theme park modeled after the house from Anne of Green Gables called Canadian World that was built on the site of a closed down coal mine. There used to be a special rapid train that went there from Sapporo. It's now kept open as a free public park, but it's sadly very quiet there. Azechi says that she really likes the lonely and exotic atmosphere there. They must not have the budget to clear snow from the park, since it's so big. Of course, that means it's closed in winter. I remember my grandpa bringing me here in summer as a kid once, and I got to ride the mini train.

Sakurako-san and Yakuwa-san only know Ashibetsu as it is now, without the vitality it used to have. They both say that it's been like this for as long as they can remember. All coal mining towns, not just Ashibetsu, have seen a steep and rapid decline. Nowadays, the town is known for having a beautiful night sky. There's a hotel called Starry Sky Resort that hosts stargazing events. You can see the stars pretty well if you go just a little bit outside of Asahikawa, so I've never felt the need to go all the way to Ashibetsu to see them, even if there is a nice observatory there. It's not that this place has no charm, but it just doesn't feel like it's unique…

"...So An-san lived here until 2 years ago?" I mumble while Sakurako-san parks near a roadside station.

I look up at the gigantic Dai Kannon statue. There must be some tourists from overseas that come here, but there aren't a lot of touristy landmarks.

"She must have attracted a lot of attention here… It would probably be better in Niseko or something… I hear there are quite a lot of Indian people in Hidaka, too."

“Yes, that’s right. In Urakawa, there are lots of racehorse trainers from India.”

“Horses? Not elephants?” I try to reply quickly, but when I notice the reporter snickering, I realize how stereotypical my question was.

“India used to be a British colony, so British culture is still present there. Cricket is one of their national sports, but horse racing is popular, too.”

“Oh… I see. Have you ever ridden a horse, reporter?”

“Yes, I have, but it’s not like everyone who has lived in England has ridden one.”

“...What about a camel? Have you ever ridden a camel?”

“I did as a kid… It’s fun to be up even higher than a horse, but they’re awful to ride. Their hair feels like a scouring pad. Elephants aren’t comfortable to ride, either.”

“Wow!”

I got curious and asked since I figured he would know a lot from his work, but he knows even more than I expected. I can’t help but wish we’d met under different circumstances.

“Now that I think about it, why did she live here in Ashibetsu instead of Sapporo, Niseko, or Hidaka?”

I’m sure the stillness of this town would be nice and relaxing, though. I wouldn’t want to live near a noisy tourist attraction, so maybe that’s why she avoided them. Everyone has different opinions on where they live. No specific city is the right answer for everyone. It’s true that my initial impression wasn’t very positive, but once you get down to it, Ashibetsu is quite a beautiful town. Since it’s winter right now, everything seems dull. Once the snow melts, everything will become more vivid, and the town’s true colours will show.

“Where did An Ichikawa work?” Sakurako-san says with a big yawn. She must be tired from driving.

The reporter scrunches up his face at her lack of manners. He thinks for a moment, then leans over from the back seat. “Should I… treat you like you’re a man?”

“What are you talking about? It doesn’t matter if I’m a man, woman, or a different gender. I just am who I am. Hurry up and

answer the question," Sakurako-san spits out at the trivial question as she sets up the car navigator again.

Yakuwa-san's brow furrows for an instant. I'm sure he's trying to be considerate of Sakurako-san's view of gender, just as she was considerate of his faith. For some reason, the two of them seem to walk at different paces. Or rather, they just don't seem to mesh well. I like Sakurako-san. However, in terms of personality, I think I empathize with the reporter more. That makes it hard to see them struggle to get along like this.

"...She seems to have had a live-in position at a hotel," The reporter replies.

I lower my head slightly in apology as I look up the address of the hotel. Apparently Ashibetsu only has one traditional inn and one hotel, so it's easy to find. After driving for just a few minutes past the roadside rest stop, we arrive at the hotel and its neighbouring hot spring for day trips. The hot spring must be pretty popular, considering how packed the parking lot is. The hotel starts check-ins after 3pm. I feel a bit shy about visiting at this time of day, so I thought we should wait until there's less customers, but the man at the front desk calls out to us.

"Ichikawa? …Excuse me, but what is your business here?"

The man is polite, although a bit suspicious of a group of men and a woman with an unclear relationship to each other. As Sakurako-san briefly explains that Ichikawa-san may be in some kind of trouble, the man's expression rapidly grows cloudy.

"I see… She suddenly left and never came back. I don't know if she was involved in some kind of crime, or anything…"

"Why didn't you report it to the police?"

"She seemed to be working here to avoid attention in the first place, so she must have had some circumstances. Besides, I was honestly a bit relieved when she left."

"Relieved?" How does anyone feel relief when their coworker disappears?

"Yes, well, she was disturbing the public morals… She was quite attractive, you see."

“So you’re saying she was causing trouble?” Sakurako-san asks with a frown.

“Quite the opposite. I was worried about her. She was well liked and valued here,” The man at the front desk says while shaking his head.

“Valued?”

“Yes.”

“Your wording seems strange.”

“There’s no other way to put it. The elderly staff members here were especially fond of her. As I’m sure you’re aware, she attracted quite a bit of attention.”

“Why do you think she was so popular?”

“Her mother used to work as a live-in waitress here until An Ichikawa-san got into middle school. That’s why the veteran staff members liked her so much.”

“Was that Chika Ichikawa?”

The man looks confused and frowns for a moment upon hearing Sakurako-san’s question. “Do you… Know if something happened to her?”

The man has only been working here for a few years, so he didn’t know her personally.

“But… She must be the reason why An Ichikawa-san came back here, right?”

An-san spent her childhood here, so maybe it’s sort of like her “home.” But the man shakes his head.

“I don’t really know. A few years ago, she suddenly said she wanted to work here, and there was no reason to turn her away. She didn’t want to attract attention, so she mostly worked behind the scenes, like in the kitchen. She took her work seriously.”

I see. Even if she stood out a bit, she had people here who she could trust like family, so it makes sense that she would want to work here.

“One waitress in particular who retired this year loved her like her own granddaughter.”

“Could you introduce us to her? I’d like to ask her some questions.”

“Right away? I can contact her, but… I don’t think she would like doing anything that attracts public attention…”

“That’s fine. Just give me her contact information and I’ll take it from there.”

“But…”

Sakurako-san vigorously hounds the poor man. “Also, does the name Hana Sumiyoshi sound familiar? Did she get any visitors?”

“I’m not sure. I can check with my coworkers, but they’re probably busy right now…”

Yakuwa-san hands the man a business card.

“Once you’re free, get our answers and call us as soon as possible,” Sakurako-san says before leaving the hotel.

“Honestly… You’re such a pain in the neck. You could have at least given him your phone number,” the reporter sighs.

“W-well, we live in an age where your personal information is always being sold!” I quickly step between them before the reporter can say anything else.

“...”

Yakuwa-san takes a breath like he’s about to say something, but decides not to and returns to the car in silence.

“It doesn’t seem like we’ve made any progress at all. Why did An Ichikawa disappear and then die? We don’t even know why she left this place.” Sakurako-san sits in the driver’s seat and curses under her breath.

All we have are a bunch of scattered pieces, with no clear connections.

“That’s what interviews are all about. This is progress. How can you do delicate and detailed work like making your skeletal specimens when you’re so simple minded?” The reporter says in a surprised and spiteful tone.

“Skeletons don’t spout nonsense like you do.”

“...You’re both immature.”

Sakurako-san glares at me as I sigh. I feel exhausted. Sakurako-san is frustrated by our lack of progress, but there’s one key thing we’ve learned. Not about Sumiyoshi-san, but about An Ichikawa-san. After studying in America, An-san’s mother went back

to Japan where she worked in Ashibetsu. This was before An-san got into middle school, so she might have gone to summer school in Niseko right after they left Ashibetsu. Since they just left a live-in job in Ashibetsu, they wouldn't have much luggage, and would need to buy new furniture. She might have used the time until she was ready to live on her own to give her daughter some international experience. Then her mother died, and she came back to Ashibetsu… Then she disappeared, and became the "possession" of a hit and run victim in Asahikawa.

This uncomfortable trip has been worthwhile. Since the reporter has made some progress, I hoped he'd have a better opinion of us now. But he's fighting with Sakurako-san now. It doesn't seem like he'll go back on his accusations of us anytime soon… The reporter notices me looking at him through the rearview mirror, and looks up from his tablet. He doesn't smile or scowl at me. He just blinks with exhaustion and looks up at the sky now that the sun has set. Even though we're in a town with beautiful stars, the thick clouds block the light from us.

Part 8

I'm more tired than usual from running around all over the place while trying to be more careful than normal. I'm relieved to finally be home. The simple dinner my mom made is delicious. They're peppers stuffed with meat, and filled with a sauce that's somewhere between tomato ketchup and demi-glace sauce. It's one of my favourites . The meat is mixed with stretchy melted cheese, filling up the bitter-sweet peppers. There's hamburg steaks, too. The rich cheese always makes me want to eat a lot of rice. It's delicious whether you eat them together or separately.

The hamburg steaks have slightly bigger pieces of chopped onion and burdock root, so they have a unique, crunchy feel. The miso soup has pumpkin and sweet potato in it, so it has a melt-in-your-mouth sweetness. My mom made what she calls "violent cucumbers" as a palate cleanser. They're cucumbers that are pounded out, then lightly pickled with salt and shiso leaves. Then there's the shiso and kombu tsukudani. It's simmered with sukeko

roe to make it sweet and salty. It's so good that I could eat two bowls of rice with just the tsukudani to go with it.

The two of us eat dinner together, with me talking about trivial things at school, and my mom complaining about work. She laughs about how the perilla plant in the kitchen is growing too wildly to eat in peace, even though it's winter.

"I don't even really like them."

"Why are you growing it, then?"

"Well, sometimes you just want to grow your own kitchen herbs, you know? When I grow mint, I never use it. I don't like cilantro. That just leaves perilla."

That's right. There's been a mint plant growing in our house for over a year now. I chose it as a keepsake for Kiyomi-san, who died on a lonely, winter day. It certainly smells nice, but I don't know how to use it, so I've just ended up using it as a decoration.

"Let's make something with it tomorrow, then. We can roll some perilla leaves up with pork belly, and grill it until it's sweet and salty. I'll help with the rolling."

"Ahh, that sounds good," my mom says as she quickly opens a can of beer.

For some reason, I'm feeling oddly grateful for my everyday life today.

"Oh yeah. Did you get the newspaper?"

"From today?"

"Yeah."

After dinner, I use a flier that was sitting around to make a bowl to put orange peels in. My mom hands me the newspaper. For whatever reason, we've always gotten the Ezo Newspaper.

"..."

I turn through each page one by one, tracing the letters with my fingertip.

"What's with the sudden interest?" my mom asks suspiciously.

I usually just watch the news on TV if there's something I'm interested in. I've never really bothered with reading the newspaper, especially since I can just look things up online. It's a lot faster to get news from social media, too, but…

“...Until now, I haven’t really given it much thought, but someone has to write every single article, every single day.”

“Yeah, and they’re always looking for something to write about,” my mom says in a half-mocking tone.

I feel a bit irritated suddenly.

“What’s wrong?”

“...Nothing.”

Every day, someone is running around searching for invisible answers in an attempt to tell the readers something - someone just like Yakuwa-san. There are so many words and incidents packed into the tiny boxes on this page. I definitely respect reporters more now, but that doesn’t mean that Yakuwa-san isn’t dangerous to us. He might even become someone I don’t want to be around in the future. That’s why I have to clear his suspicions of us, no matter what. We have to solve the mystery behind Ichikawa-san’s death, and get the reporter to trust us. But that’s easier said than done.

After such a hectic weekend, I have no motivation left by Monday.

“It’s still morning and you’re already yawning. Where’s your usual pep?” Azechi says. I let out a big yawn as soon as I sit at my desk.

“It’s nothing… I just had a busy weekend.”

“You’re always busy, aren’t you, Tatewaki-kun?” Kougami says. “Are you making sure you study?”

“Actually… Do either of you like dolls?”

“Dolls?”

“Yeah… Some people still like them, even as an adult,” I add before their opinion of me worsens.

The part of my weekend that stood out most was those dolls. A doll as pale as a corpse, and a doll with blue eyes. A one of a kind doll that was loved by countless children.

“Well, I guess they’re cute. Why? Are you into dolls now, Tatewaki?” Azechi says unpleasantly while looking at Kougami.

“No, it’s not like that…”

They seem uncomfortable hearing me talk about this.

“Some people have a phobia of dolls, so it’s hard to say. That uncanny valley feeling is different for everyone.”

Still, there’s plenty of children who play with dolls, and adore them. Those people can feel fond of them even when they grow up, or even become totally invested as adults. Hearing that was pretty convincing. You don’t start hating the things you liked when you were a kid just because you’re an adult.

“There’s doll fan groups. There’s a lady in my circle of online goth friends who devotes everything to dolls. When pocket money turns into a salary, it brings both comfort and danger,” Azechi says with a straight face.

“Also, I think it’s easier to feel attached to something that looks like a human. My grandma gave me a doll once, and I still have and cherish it,” Kougami says.

It’s true that the way we empathize with things changes when they have a human form.

“Besides… Those beautiful eyes, cute lips, rosy cheeks, lovely skin… I love her dreamy clothes… She’s not just cute, she’s my ideal doll.”

“Ideal?”

“Yeah. I don’t think dolls are just about ideals, though… You can put your own wishes and aspirations into them. Dolls are all about those special feelings, I think. I don’t really know how to put it, but… It’s like it’s a part of my heart, or my spirit. But then there’s some girls who just wear whatever they like, like Ranka,” Kougami laughs. “But even if I were to wear the clothes I want to wear, and look exactly how I want to look, it still probably wouldn’t be quite right. Dolls are something that people can superimpose their ideals and feelings on, I think.”

“T-Then… What might someone be feeling when they destroy that doll themself?”

“Huh?”

Kougami doesn’t seem to have an answer for that question right away, so she looks at Azechi. Azechi sneakily applies some cream to her slightly red lips, then laughs.

“Death.”

“Death? …What?”

“Right. Well, it doesn’t necessarily have to be death of the body. I mean, it’s the same as if you ‘lost’ something as important to you as your soul, right? It’s part of who you are. Losing your favourite doll is the same as dying.”

“…”

The doll is in the shape of a human. Anything shaped like a human will one day harbor a human life. I read something like that in a story somewhere. It’s just a toy, but it’s still special. Plenty of people love their toys, but since dolls resemble humans, they seem more alive.

“Then, for example… If someone cut the head off their favourite doll just before dying, would that be like practicing before their own suicide?”

I think about how Sumiyoshi-san committed suicide in Pepan with her expensive doll’s head cut off, and the friendship doll that should have been destroyed during the war.

“When you cut the head off a doll, you either want to cut off your own head, or you want to decapitate someone else and liken them to the doll. I don’t think that’s normal. There’s lots of other ways to die other than decapitation, after all.”

It’s true that cutting off someone’s head is horrifyingly cruel. If that doll was supposed to represent something else, it could have been a god, a spirit, or another person.

“I think having the form of a human is very meaningful,” Kougami says meekly. Her head is resting on Azechi’s stomach, who is standing next to her. That puppet-like position makes my head rush with anxiety.

Part 9

I ruminate on what Azechi and Kougami said while I sit in class. About the doll that was killed, and the poor doll that was tossed around by war. I’m glad that Anne Victoria was able to escape a worse fate. I’m still curious, so I decide to go to the bookstore after school. I wanted to learn more about creative dolls, but all I found was an expensive photo book that honestly horrified me. Maybe I

just don’t like dolls enough to withstand that level of realism. This must be what people mean by “uncanny valley.” I end up buying “Friendship Dolls Across the North Sea.” It’s a book about blue eyed dolls.

The blue eyed doll project was created by Sidney Gulick, a missionary who wanted to foster friendship between the children of Japan and America. He also wanted the dolls to bring comfort to children affected by the great Kanto earthquake of 1923. He presented 12 739 dolls for Hinamatsuri. The Japanese children were delighted to receive the dolls, who each had their own name, handmade clothes, and passport. The dolls, which were given to schools, were not only cute, but also innovative. Children and adults alike were captivated by how they would close their eyes when lying down, and how they could say “mama.” I wonder how many of those little girls grew up to be mothers after caring for their dolls. As thanks, Japan sent their own dolls with tea sets to the US. The dolls connected the two countries.

Until war destroyed all of it. America became the enemy. All of the dolls sent from America were supposed to be destroyed. It’s not known if the government ever actually issued orders to destroy them or not, but people across the whole country got the feeling that they had no choice but to destroy them. Some teachers immediately destroyed their dolls out of loyalty to their country, while others had each of their students stomp on the dolls while shouting that they hate America. Some reluctantly and tearfully destroyed their dolls, while others, like Anne Victoria, were kept in secret. Many people will never forget the sound of the dolls breaking and the screams of the children. Some felt bad for the dolls, but still destroyed them out of frustration over sending their own children to die in the war. Some people saved the dolls for the children who had to go to war… Some scooped up the broken remains of the dolls, and cherished the fragments forever.

It’s just like Azechi said. Dolls are alive. They have innocent faces, like children. And so they lived through, and were at the mercy of, war. I’m shocked to learn that this sad tale wasn't made up. I’ve

never known war. Why did they all have such blind faith that destroying the dolls was the right thing to do? But I also understand that at that moment, they thought they *had* to do it. That's how war is. I feel unbearably sad reading this alone at home, so I head to the Kujou house. I have to talk to Sakurako-san about the doll. Aoba-san's advice crosses my mind, so I try to make the book in my hand obvious, so anyone watching knows I have a good reason to be here.

There's already a mountain of snow by the entrance. Sakurako-san says that whenever she has time, she carries snow from the front of the house to the back garden, but Gran usually shovels it. Sakurako-san doesn't try to leave it to Gran on purpose, Gran just clears it away before she can even notice it's piled up. She doesn't listen when Sakurako-san tells her that she'll do it, either. Before, Gran used to clear the snow from both the front and back of the house so much that you could see the stone path, but now she leaves it piled up on both sides. I vaguely wonder if her lower back isn't doing well. I wish I could come and help shovel more often, but the phantom might not let me do that.

Sakurako-san and Gran welcome me as always, despite my sudden visit. It almost feels like home to me. I don't think either of them would mind if I started saying "I'm home" instead of "thanks for having me" when I came over. On one hand, I'm happy that Hector welcomes me so enthusiastically, but on the other hand I'm glad that my presence here is just a normal part of daily life for them.

"A book, hm? Let me see it."

Sakurako-san emotionlessly flips through the pages while sitting in her usual chair while I hug Hector. He violently licks my face. He has his winter coat now, so he's at his peak fluffiest. I can feel my heart being purified just by touching him. My clothes are completely covered in fur, though.

"Is this about a blue eyed doll? I think I've heard of them before." Gran comes in carrying a teapot. She swats away the fur that's floating in the air.

"Come to think of it… Did Sakurako-san ever play with dolls as a kid?" I ask Gran.

I feel bad about getting fur everywhere, so I offer to brush Hector while we talk.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t remember her playing pretend very much.”

“I liked to play doctor. I played autopsy with Naoe a lot, too.”

“Huh…”

Behind Gran, who tilts her head to the side without looking up from the book, Sakurako-san makes a shocking confession. Well, playing autopsy… sounds like something she would do… but… what?

“But like… What did you do…?” I timidly ask, unable to contain my surprise and curiosity.

“The statute of limitations is up, but it’s not a game we told adults about ahahaha.”

“Young lady?!” Gran stares daggers at Sakurako-san as she laughs loudly.

What kind of game was it… I recall the possibility of Hanabusa’s ghost listening in on our conversation, so I quickly change the topic back to the dolls.

“What do you think? I haven’t read all of it yet, but it’s so sad…”

The book was written after several interviews were done with people involved in disposing of the dolls. I’m completely heartbroken over how many dolls were destroyed.

“Hm… Well, it looks like you found a good book.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah… Here, read this.” Sakurako-san holds the book out to me with a page open.

Hector paws at the air, begging me not to stop brushing him. I pet him with my left hand while I look at the book.

Beatrice Anne, who was given to Ashibetsu, and Victoria Anne, who was given to Pepan, Asahikawa, were sister dolls. Shizu Ichikawa, a teacher from Ashibetsu, sewed them matching outfits. Shizu-san was originally from Asahikawa, so that connection made her feel attached to the twin dolls.

“The war became more intense, and the children cried about having to destroy the poor doll, who was dressed in shabby rags. I was told I had to do it, but I couldn’t stand the thought of breaking it violently, and I didn’t want the children to have to kill their friend. I set the doll on fire by myself that night. When I close my eyes, I can still see her body struggling and writhing in the flame.”

In the 18th year of the Showa era, it was determined that the friendship dolls were only given to Japan to catch the country off guard. That year, with many tears, the dolls were consigned to oblivion.

“...Shizu Ichikawa?”

Another person with the surname Ichikawa. And she was a woman from Asahikawa who worked as a teacher in Ashibetsu, and loved dolls…

“Sure, there’s a lot of people named Ichikawa… But this can’t be a coincidence. It might be a piece of the puzzle.” Sakurako-san narrows her eyes as she brings her teacup to her lips.

“So then Chika-san moved to Ashibetsu after living in Pepan…”

If this Shizu Ichikawa woman was Chika-san’s relative, her mother for example, it’d make sense for Chika-san to move to Ashibetsu.

“But… I kind of get it. Chika-san cherished one of the twin dolls, which her mother burned the other twin of, since she was young… Maybe Chika-san inherited her mother’s wishes.”

“Or her regrets.” Sakurako-san suggests we contact Yakuwa-san. “I want to know when Shizu Ichikawa died, and who the author of this book is. Let’s have him investigate.”

“Have him investigate… Yakuwa-san isn’t your gopher, you know. Besides, this author has probably already passed away, since this is an old book. The elementary school where Shizu-san worked has closed down and been turned into a library, too,” I say while I text Yakuwa-san.

“What a drag. Everywhere we go, everyone is dead.”

“Geez, corpses and crimes where you can’t see the bones are so boring. I wish he’d have given me Anzu’s skull to thank me for

identifying it.”

“Sakurako-san?!”

As usual, she just says whatever she wants. That’s completely in character for her to say. Still, it makes me feel uneasy, so I hug Hector. He’s laying belly up, waiting to be brushed again.

Part 10

Two days later, Kougami is walking ahead of me out the school gates. “Oh!” she exclaims, then turns to look at me with a stern expression.

“What?”

She surprises me by suddenly grabbing my hand with a slightly angry expression on her face. We’ve never walked around while holding hands before. I get the feeling that this isn’t regular physical contact, though.

“Hey there.” Yakuwa-san is waving at me while leaning against a parked car.

“Oh, I see. It’s fine… Probably.”

Kougami remembers Yakuwa-san kidnapping me, so even though I told her that he’s fine, she’s still cautious of him. For now, he’s… not quite an ally, but a collaborator. The enemy of my enemy, I suppose.

“Really?”

“Yes, there’s really nothing to worry about. Oh, but I won’t be able to study with you today… We have something to do.”

“That’s fine, but… If you keep that up, you won’t get into university. Make sure to study, okay?”

“Y-yeah, got it.”

Kougami glances at Yakuwa-san. It’s nice that she’s worried about me, but I have nothing to say for myself. If things keep going like this, I really won’t be able to study at all. I cancel our plans and part ways with Kougami, even though she looks like she still has something to say. Yakuwa-san’s eyes are narrowed like a fox after watching our conversation.

“...Wipe that look off your face.”

I'm lucky Imai isn't with me today, otherwise he might have gotten the wrong idea. Yakuwa-san asks me to get into the car, so I slide into the passenger seat, but I immediately regret it. I'm completely defenseless here. If Yakuwa-san turns out to be a bad person, I might as well have held my neck out to the grim reaper's sickle.

"Actually… Isn't it a long way to travel from Sapporo to Asahikawa?"

"You think so? It only takes an hour by high speed train."

"Wouldn't it be better to just call or email?" Sure it's only an hour, but still… "Don't you have other articles to write?"

"Yes, but there's some things you can only understand by meeting in person, and looking someone in the eyes," Yakuwa-san says while he puts on his seatbelt and resets the navigator.

"Well… I guess you lose some nuance when you only talk through text."

"You can get a completely different impression of someone by meeting them in person, compared to communicating over email. There will always be thoughts that they don't write down. By meeting in person, you can get insight into the things they're not saying."

"...The things they're not saying, huh…"

Is that why he wants to work with us on this case? To find out the things we're not telling him? I'm scared of the way he looks at me, but I can also feel his intention, or rather the backbone of his character, in his quiet words. I like bones now, though not as much as Sakurako-san. I'm confused by the contradictory feelings inside of me. I feel like if the reporter wasn't our enemy, I'd like to get to know him better.

"Um… Where are we going? Should I call Sakurako-san?"

"Yes, we should go pick her up. I can tell you the details on the way. I'm sure she wouldn't want to hear about it over call or text."

"Ah… Yeah, you're right about that."

It took me countless months to get used to Sakurako-san's eccentricities, but Yakuwa-san is already adjusting. He might have just given up on trying to fight her, though. I'm frustrated by the clear difference in our life experience. I don't know what to talk about, so I

end up staying silent until we get most of the way to Nagayama shrine where we're supposed to meet Sakurako-san. The only sound in the car is the car radio playing quietly, making the silence even more awkward. I've never wanted to hear His Excellency Diavel as badly as I do right now.

"...What's wrong?" Sakurako-san says with a suspicious expression as she gets into the car.

She might have picked up on the strange atmosphere. I really wish this wasn't the one time she actually read the mood properly.

"You must have a lot of free time if you're here on a weekday afternoon."

"You're pretty flexible too, considering you're also free enough to be here," Yakuwa-san tosses Sakurako-san's insulting boomerang right back at her.

"So? What did you learn?"

"I learned a little bit about Shizu Ichikawa-san… And I got in contact with a former employee from the hot spring," Yakuwa-san says.

Sakurako-san yawns, which means she probably stayed up all night. He starts driving without telling us where we're going, but it's probably Ashibetsu.

"Read that for me," Yakuwa-san says as he gestures at a file in a paper bag by my feet.

"Let's see… Shizu Ichikawa-san was born in Asahikawa in 1915. She and her husband were both teachers, and moved to Ashibetsu after marrying. There's a record of her celebrating her 90th birthday in Ashibetsu in 2005…"

"Born in 1915… She should be Chika Ichikawa's mother then, right?" Sakurako-san says while leaning forward and looking impatient at my reading.

"She'd be her grandmother, I think. The article says she was still in good health at the age of 90, and even participated in the 1000 person dance in the summer."

"Sounds like she was a pretty lively old lady." I'm not familiar with the 1000 person dance, but I can imagine what kind of event it is.

“She passed away 2 months after celebrating her 100th birthday… They say it was a peaceful death.”

There’s a newspaper article in the file with a photo of an old woman dancing in a yukata. Although she’s elderly, thin, and bent at the waist, she still looks like she has a solid bone structure and square face, rather than the small frame that older people usually have.

The article says that Shizu-san lived a life of many hardships. Overcoming war and deaths of family members, she worked as a teacher for many years, then continued to do volunteer activities after retiring. It also says that her only surviving son died young of illness. She raised her two grandchildren, but it doesn’t have any more details about them. One of those two grandchildren might be Chika-san, An-san’s mother.

“Since it’s an article from my newspaper, I contacted the person who wrote it… He’s a very strict old man who worked as a teacher for several years.”

Based on her history, Shizu-san is most likely the teacher who burned the doll mentioned in the book. The question now is whether or not Shizu-san is actually Chika-san’s grandmother and An-san’s great grandmother.

“I already have an appointment to meet a woman who used to work there at 5 today.”

“You’ve been thorough, haven’t you?”

“Oho?” Sakurako-san says after taking the file from me.

“You’re so pushy and rude that I’m losing my patience,” the reporter says.

“You must not have had much to start with,” Sakurako-san laughs, but the reporter scowls. I feel a sharp pain in my stomach.

Part 11

It has started to snow, but fortunately it doesn’t stop us from reaching the cafe by 5. It’s a cute, mountain hut-style store. As soon as we walk through the door, the scent of spicy curry hits my stomach. Waiting for us is the woman who quit working at the hot

spring earlier this year. She's lively, so she seems younger than she is.

"My name is Fuji," she says with a polite bow. It must be a habit from her work.

"We want to know about Chika and An Ichikawa," Sakurako-san asks frankly, as usual.

Fuji-san looks surprised, then looks at Yakuwa-san with a troubled expression.

"...Well, like I said on the phone, I brought some pictures of us together… But I don't really want to cause any trouble for that girl… I mean, you don't know for sure if those bones are from An, right?" Fuji-san says with a look of hope on her face. She doesn't want An-san to be upset if she found out that Fuji-san was talking about her.

"I won't put anything into an article until there's more concrete evidence, of course. I'll also make sure not to write anything that would cause problems for An-san."

"If you say so…" Fuji-san agrees, but her expression says she's not totally convinced.

The situation is a bit tense, but I notice the menu, and it smells like curry… The pictures make my stomach start growling loudly. A moment of silence. It's okay. I'm sure they didn't hear it… But my hopes are dashed when Fuji-san bursts out laughing. Soon, all three of the adults are laughing at me.

"I'm sorry, I should have noticed. Please go ahead and eat while we talk. The omelet curry here is delicious," Fuji-san says while she hands me the menu.

That does sound appealing, but I'm pretty sure we're having curry for dinner tonight at home. No, but curry is delicious no matter how often you eat it. But I also want to pay my mom's curry proper respect, too. Not wanting to cause any problems, I decide to order napolitan. Something about having napolitan at a coffeehouse makes it absolutely irresistible.

For better or for worse, the tension is eased after I place my order. Yakuwa-san makes some small talk about the weather and current events to prevent the warmed up atmosphere from turning cold. I guess he'll get down to business once my food arrives. After a

while, the pasta arrives in front of me. Just looking at it makes me start to smile without realizing.

"Well, if you'll excuse me…" I say before tackling the spaghetti noodles dyed orange by sauce.

It's a bit different from how we make it at home, somehow. It has the characteristic sweet and slightly salty flavour of napolitan. There's no way it couldn't be delicious. Fuji-san looks at me grinning and smiles.

"An loves the napolitan here, too."

"I can see why, it's delicious. Do you eat here together often?"

The way she says "loves" instead of "loved" gives me a sharp pain in my heart.

"Yeah… She's always been a bit too thin. I always take her out for a meal when I get paid."

Sakurako-san and I glance at each other when Fuji-san says the word "thin." The acid erosion on the teeth of the skull we found indicated a possible eating disorder. With An-san as the topic of conversation, Fuji-san seems like she's found her resolve. After taking a sip of her latte, she slowly begins to speak.

"Chika-chan started working at the hotel when An was only 5 years old–"

Since she had a young child while looking for a live-in job, she had to desperately beg for the opportunity, saying she would work diligently, and wouldn't be a nuisance. The owner hired Chika-san because one of the other employees had just quit when she applied. Everyone knew that Chika-san must have been going through something, since she was looking for a job with no place to live and a young girl with her, but Chika-san never talked much about herself. She was always earnest, obedient, and very attentive. When her mother was at work, the young An-san would quietly read in their room, or help remove the strings from peas in the kitchen. Since the young mother was so hardworking and the little girl was well behaved, the staff treated the Ichikawa family warmly.

"She isn't a redhead, but… It's funny that An-chan comes from Ashibetsu where they have a replica of Anne's town. Compared to

Anne of Green Gables, An-chan was more quiet and obedient. Everyone thought she was lovely."

Chika-san was proficient in English, as well, so she was entrusted with dealing with foreign tourists. Everyone hoped she'd work there forever, but after thinking about An-san's future career path, she decided to return to her hometown of Asahikawa.

"Everyone was worried about whether they would be okay, but… It was for her child's future. At the very least… I think living in the city suits An."

But once An-san got into grade 6, she and her mother left Ashibetsu.

"Did they ever participate in the 1000 person dance?"

"What?"

"Ah… Now that you mention it, I took An there once. Chika-chan hardly ever left the hotel, since she was always sewing. She had to make clothes for An, and… She made dresses for dolls, too."

"What about An? We want to hear more about her," Sakurako-san says.

Fuji-san silently looks down at her cup. There's a faint trace of foam around the edge from her latte. I get the feeling that her hesitation comes from the fact that she doesn't know us very well yet, so she doesn't want to share the details of An-san's life. Or maybe she still isn't sure if the skull really belonged to An-san or not. After a few hesitant breaths, Fuji-san begins to speak.

"...I don't know if she failed to get into university, or if she had financial trouble, but… When she was 19, she said she wanted to work at the hotel."

According to An-san, Chika-san passed away shortly after they got to Asahikawa. She probably had nowhere else to turn. After hearing about her hardship, the waitresses begged the owner of the hotel to hire her immediately. An-san was a hard worker, smart, and good with computers, so she ended up being a good employee. From there, the rest is basically the same as what the man at the front desk told us. She worked hard to avoid attention, but sometimes she caused a bit of a stir, so her life wasn't always peaceful.

“Were there any signs before she disappeared?”

“No. Everything was normal up until the morning of that day, but-” Fuji-san looks like she still has something she wants to say.

“But what?” Sakurako-san asks with her eyebrow arched.

“I’m not sure if it’s related, but the day before An disappeared, someone she called ‘sensei’ visited her. I think… It was the vice principal.”

“...Vice principal?”

Sakurako-san leans forward in her seat, pushing me out of the way. Fuji-san tilts her head, like she’s trying to think back.

“She seemed surprised, and had a confused look on her face. She looked troubled, and I got a weird feeling from her… This might be totally off base, but I think An might have been trying to run away from him.”

That’s why she didn’t try too hard to track An-san down, although she regrets it now.

“When did this vice principal visit her?”

“In summer. I remember it was hot out.”

Yakuwa-san has been taking notes, but he suddenly furrows his brow. “Do you remember when An-san’s birthday is? I want to know if she was born before or after the school year started…”

I don’t immediately understand what Yakuwa-san is hoping to gain from such an abrupt question.

Fuji-san has a lonely, nostalgic smile.

“Of course I remember. How could I forget… It’s on March 3rd, Doll’s Day. The lobby of the hot spring was decorated with Hina dolls every year. I remember how she was embarrassed but happy when everyone congratulated her in front of them.”

I think about the scene Fuji-san must be seeing in her downcast eyes as she reminisces. The hotel lobby must have been splendid when it was fully decorated. In front of the brightly coloured artificial peach blossoms and dolls with prim expressions, the young An-san is shyly receiving birthday wishes from the adults as Chika-san watches over her. What happened in just a few short years that destroyed their happiness?

“Do you know anything about what kind of trouble Chika and An were involved in? Even something trivial is fine.”

“...I don’t really know, but… Chika-chan’s younger brother, An’s uncle, seems to have been quite a nuisance. He caused a lot of problems for the family in the past. An once told me that he didn’t really work, and had committed crimes before.” With that, Fuji-san lets out a deep sigh, as if she’s emptying her lungs. “Chika-chan’s parents died when she was young, so she was raised by her grandma, but… When she got pregnant with An, they cut ties with her. She didn’t come from a very happy family, considering her younger brother and all.” Fuji-san concludes by saying there’s nothing else she can say.

I gently hold out some pocket tissues to her. At that moment, I realize that my mouth is smeared with neapolitan sauce. Fuji-san laughs and says that she’ll use them.

“I’m all alone, too… If those girls had told me what they were going to do, I could have helped them a little, but… It’s hard.”

They say that blood is thicker than water. Sakurako-san says that some water can be thicker than blood, though. The viscosity of blood ties always seems to drown me.

We exit the store, leaving Fuji-san feeling lonely. It’s after 6pm now. The Ashibetsu sky is dark, but I can’t see any stars. The cold wind brings the warm scent of a kerosene heater as we head for the car. I don’t know how the three women from the Ichikawa family felt about the town of Ashibetsu, but I’m sure their time here was unforgettable for each of them.

“It’s possible that she was trying to get away from her uncle… Maybe the doll disappeared at the same time as when An left Ashibetsu,” Sakurako-san says while resting her chin on the window in the back seat.

“Oh… Yeah, now that you mention it...”

Fuji-san said that An-san started working at the hotel 4 years ago, when she was 19. That’s around the same time as when the doll that Shimada-san told us about disappeared.

“There’s also that vice principal. Yakuwa, you should ask Shimada to investigate him.”

“...” Naturally, Yakuwa-san furrows his brow when Sakurako-san orders him around.

“Yakuwa, investigate him and then contact me.”

“...Is that an order?”

“No, but you’re good at that kind of thing, aren’t you?”

“You look well-bred, but it seems like you don’t know how to speak politely.”

“What do you want me to say? Please? P-l-e-a-s-e, Yakuwa.”

“Can you say that without wrinkling your nose?

I nervously watch for Sakurako-san’s reaction. We don’t have access to Yakuwa-san’s information network. Sakurako-san seems to feel some kind of expectation for, or trust in, Yakuwa-san. In her own way.

A few days later, I get an email from Yakuwa-san. After school, Sakurako-san and I sit in our usual tea shop, surrounded by phones. We’re close enough that I can see her long eyelashes, and the faint hair on her cheeks. After much deliberation, Shimada-san finally gave Yakuwa-san an answer as to who this “vice principal” is.

He wasn’t the vice principal from Chika Ichikawa-san’s school, but he was one of the men who went on the trip to America, and was the vice principal of a neighbouring elementary school. His name is Tokushirou Osanaga, but he has already retired. To the public, he resigned due to illness, however there were rumors that he was embezzling money from the school.

“The time frame he was embezzling money coincides with the time that Chika-san and An-san moved back to Asahikawa from Ashibetsu. He already paid back the 3 million yen, but maybe there’s some kind of connection.”

Sakurako-san snorts as she reads the email from Yakuwa-san.

“Apparently he currently lives in Asahikawa, near the Asahiyama Zoo. That’s not far from where the accident with the unidentified body occurred, Boy.”

I don’t know if this vice principal was on Chika-san’s side or not. It feels like the dots are connecting little by little, though. It would be nice if we had a photo or sketch of the person involved in the

accident who had An-san's skull, but unfortunately his face was too severely damaged. But looking at it another way, someone might have intentionally damaged his face. Either to make sure he's dead, or to make him unrecognizable.

"I'd definitely like to talk to the vice principal. I want to ask him about the blue eyed doll, so let's have Yakuwa interview him," Sakurako-san says as if it's the obvious thing to do. I smile bitterly.

"Don't forget to say 'please', Sakurako-san."

She smiles widely at me. It's the grin of a mischievous child. It's always been like this, ever since the moment we met. Unable to resist her smile, I email Yakuwa-san.

Part 12

The road to Asahiyama Zoo is always exciting for some reason, even if you're not going to the zoo. Today, though, I can't enjoy the passing scenery.

Osanaga-san's house is in the spot where the agricultural and residential areas connect just before Asahiyama. It's a beautiful, old, one story Japanese style house. Even considering the low cost of land in the area, the lot is quite large. There's parking space for 3 cars, and a spacious garden. I wonder if he grows his own vegetables in the summer.

We meet up with Yakuwa-san, who says he was just barely able to make it for the agreed upon time, and ring the house's intercom. After a short wait, a tall, thin, fussy looking man greets us. Perhaps it's because of his thin, grey hair that's almost white, and the pale tone of his olive green, knit sweater combined with the black frames of his glasses that gives him an overly strict, high strung atmosphere. I reflexively straighten my posture.

"Ah, Ezo News. I've been waiting for you." Osanaga-san greets us with a smile, and calls us into the house.

I'm glad I brought the Chick Pudding that my grandma loved as a gift. When I smell the sweet scent of lavender in the entrance, I suddenly feel like I've smelled the same scent somewhere before.

Yakuwa-san stands in front of me and gives a brief greeting. I'm introduced as a high school student who's interested in the

history of his hometown. He doesn't say anything specific about Sakurako-san, implying she's his staff or something.

"My wife went out shopping and hasn't come back yet. Do you mind waiting a moment while I prepare some tea?" He asks while leading us to the living room and having us sit on the couch.

I decline, but Yakuwa-san says that he doesn't mind waiting before starting the "interview."

To start with, he tells us the whole story behind the blue eyed dolls, which we already knew, but also includes some details that weren't in the book. I get so enthralled in listening to the steady way he tells the story, like he's told it countless times, that I forget the reason we're actually here. No matter how many times I hear it, the profound sadness of the story makes my eyes sting.

"It's reassuring to hear that young people are interested in these dolls… At your age, you've never known war. I'd like it if nobody ever had to go through it again, which is why history is so important."

I stop pretending to take notes so I can wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. Osanaga-san puts his hand on my shoulder.

"I used to be a teacher, too… I wonder how teachers back then felt when they had to send their students off to war… My heart hurts just to think about it."

War destroys peace and peoples' lives, just like it destroyed those dolls. I nod slowly as the vice principal tells me about the unbearable feelings the teachers back then were tormented by. But…

"Well, that's enough about the dolls. Let's get down to business," Sakurako-san says, trying to break up the sentimental atmosphere. "This is getting boring. We really want to talk about the Ichikawa family."

"...What?" Osanaga-san looks startled and frowns for a moment.

"You remember, don't you? Chika Ichikawa, that is. In 199X, she went on the trip to America with you."

"..." Osanaga-san was so talkative before, but he's gone silent now.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something that made you uncomfortable? All I did was ask about one of the other envoys- unless something happened with her?” Sakurako-san asks in a slow, almost sarcastic, tone with the corners of her mouth upturned.

Osanaga-san immediately drops the soft, friendly persona and turns his stern gaze to Sakurako-san.

“No, I was just trying to remember. Now that you mention it, there was a young woman there… A lot of people came along, you see. Why are you asking about her?”

We suddenly hear a crashing sound, so we all turn to look at where it came from.

“Oh… Excuse me.”

A young woman is standing there, holding a tray with a coffee set. She looks to be in her mid to late 20s. She has very short hair, a slender neck, and delicate limbs that make me worry that she’s too thin. She has fair, beautiful skin without much makeup on.

“...”

I suddenly feel like I’ve seen here somewhere before, but I don’t know where. She has a stiff expression and tries to avoid making eye contact with us as she sets down the coffee. She only spilled one of the cups, so Osanaga-san says he’ll just have some later. The woman starts to walk away, but stops in front of the door to the kitchen and looks at us suspiciously over her shoulder. She seems to think that we’re threatening Osanaga-san or something. She’s not entirely wrong, though.

“Is she your daughter?” I ask Osanaga-san as I silently hope she doesn’t report us.

He forces a smile. “No, it’s a bit embarrassing, but she’s my wife. I was sick a while back, and she helped take care of me.”

“Oh… Sorry about that.”

I quickly reach for my coffee cup to try to cover the mortified expression on my face. The brown liquid inside the expensive looking coffee cup, which is decorated with a wild strawberry design, is too bitter for me to drink without milk and sugar, so I just pretend to drink it before putting it back down.

“My previous wife and I never had any children. I lived alone after she passed away 10 years ago, but people become weak when they’re ill. I feel bad about tying down a young woman, but I can at least leave her a small inheritance,” Osanaga-san says quietly with his head hanging.

Sakurako-san looks at him coldly- no, contemptuously.

“We’ve gotten off topic. We’re looking for Chika Ichikawa, and her daughter, An,” Sakurako-san says. She points her chin toward Yakuwa-san.

He instantly frowns.

“Last year, there was an accident near here in which a man died. His identity is unknown, but he had a young woman’s skull in his possession.”

“What?”

“We believe those bones belonged to An Ichikawa.”

“...”

Yakuwa-san reluctantly gives a small nod. “We did a bit of research, and found out Chika Ichikawa was interested in the blue eyed dolls when she was young. It makes sense, since her grandmother who raised her, Shizu Ichikawa, received one of the friendship dolls, but had to burn it herself.”

“A young lady took on the regrets of her grandmother, and got involved in the preservation of the doll said to be the sister of the doll that was burned. It’s hard to believe that a man who works with dolls, and took a much younger woman as his wife, wouldn’t be interested in her.

Yakuwa-san speaks to Osanaga-san with a consistent rhythm, but Sakurako-san seems to deliberately slow down the pace when she adds onto what he said. Osanaga-san glares at the two of them for a moment, seeming more angry than surprised, but then reconsiders and forces the corners of his mouth into a smile.

“I’ve been quite forgetful these days. I’m sure my memory will come back if I have some time to look into it. My apologies, but we’ll have to reschedule,” he says apologetically with a fake smile plastered to his face. It feels like he made no effort to hide the fact that it isn’t the real reason he’s turning us away.

There's no point in trying to push him any further. Sakurako-san lets out a short sigh of either resignation or dissatisfaction, then looks at Yakuwa-san. She looks like she's trying to tell him not to ask anything else. Yakuwa-san calmly nods, then stands up with a smile just as insincere as Osanaga-san's.

"Of course. We'd love to talk to you again, so please contact me when you remember."

We thank them for the coffee, then Yakuwa-san leads us out of the house. The wife doesn't show her face.

"Why are you asking about that woman now, after all this time?" Osanaga-san suddenly asks while he sees us off at the entrance.

"The skull. It spoke to me, so I had no choice but to listen," Sakurako-san says in a cheerful tone.

Osanaga-san's face is stiff. His expression looks like it's somewhere between fear and anger. We're definitely not going to be welcome back here again. Yakuwa-san's decision to drop the whole story on Osanaga-san seems to have caused a lot of problems. Sakurako-san, who seems unusually cautious, agrees to retreat for now.

"Yakuwa, you can go home ahead of us," Sakurako-san calls out while Yakuwa-san starts to get into his car.

"That's fine with me, but… Where are you going to go?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm just going to deliver something to an acquaintance of mine who works at Asahiyama Zoo. You can come if you want, but we're just going to talk about bones. Besides… He's working on a specimen of a monkey right now, so you'll need to put up with the smell…"

"That's okay, I'll just go home."

Yakuwa-san quickly gets into his car and drives off. I wave both my hands as he drives off. He raises one hand to me, without looking back. It makes me kind of happy.

"So Sawa-san is working on a monkey specimen?"

I excitedly climb into the passenger seat of her car. Sakurako-san slowly turns her head to look at Osanaga-san's house, then starts the car.

“...Sakurako-san?”

She parks on the side of the road right outside the lot.

“What’s wrong?”

“...”

Sakurako-san doesn’t answer the question, but I immediately understand why. She’s in a spot you can’t see from the house, waiting for something. As if on cue, the vice principal’s wife leaves the house. As soon as she notices Sakurako-san’s car, she hurries over.

“I figured that you’d show up. We always meet in the strangest places,” Sakurako-san rolls down the driver’s side window and says to the woman.

The woman forces a smile, but she looks like she’s about to cry.

“Why? What did you come here for? Is it about my sister?” Judging by how anxious the wife sounds, the two of them are acquaintances.

I definitely feel like I’ve seen her before. I look at Sakurako-san, waiting for an introduction, but she snorts.

“What? You haven’t noticed, Boy? Well, I suppose she does look different now. More like her dead sister. I don’t know why she would do that, though. Are you trying to hijack her life?” Sakurako-san says with a poisonous sneer.

“Dead sister?”

Looking at the woman’s stern expression, I’m suddenly reminded of something– or rather, someone.

“Oh…”

“...If you say anything else, I’ll report you.”

The wife lowers her head. I thought she was going to cry, but instead she looks at Sakurako-san with anger burning in her eyes. However, Sakurako-san laughs it off.

“You make it sound like you didn’t want me to come. I didn’t come here to see you. Still, it’s quite an impressive transformation. As expected of the she-fox who seduced her sister’s fiance, then killed them both - Yoshimi Mizutani.”

Part 13

“Yoshimi Mizutani.”

As soon as I hear that name, my heart starts to pound. I almost stop breathing. I have the same feeling in the pit of my stomach as when I slipped on the snow while sledding as a kid.

Yoshimi Mizutani. The younger sister of Kiyomi Mizutani, the woman who committed suicide in an apartment my mom manages during the winter of my first year of high school. She’s the one who had an affair with Kiyomi-san’s partner, and pushed her to commit suicide. Kiyomi-san stayed quiet about it, then took poison and died. Unable to bear it, her fiance followed suit.

I had wondered what happened to Yoshimi-san after she was left behind. The one who drove the beautiful, kind Kiyomi-san to death. Although the dead don’t ask for revenge and I’m not part of her family, I still hoped that Yoshimi-san was living a life befitting of what she did. In other words, I didn’t want her to be happy. Facing the reality in front of me that she’s living a new life with a new husband scorches my sense of reason a fair bit.

“Why… Why are you here…!”

I never thought I’d see her again, and I didn’t want to. Since we live in the same city, there was always the possibility that we could run into each other, but could such a cruel coincidence actually occur? Maybe it was a premonition that I’ve been thinking about Kiyomi-san lately.

“But… Still… That can’t be true! Why!”

Sakurako-san glances at me and narrows her eyes. “Don’t make that face, boy. Life goes on, even after losing your family.”

Yoshimi Mizutani is like soft, sweet smelling fluff, compared to her sister who was more like a freshly washed, ironed piece of raw cloth. Her feminine voice and appearance make me flustered. I have a hard time believing that the woman standing before me is really Yoshimi-san, but Sakurako-san seems completely convinced that she is. Judging by the woman’s reactions, Sakurako-san seems to be right. But then…

“She really looks just like Kiyomi-san…” I unintentionally mumble. Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders.

“It’s true that her appearance has changed quite a bit, but you can’t change your skeletal structure. Things like your ear shape, too,” she says as she touches her earlobe. “Those don’t change, even if you lose weight.” Sakurako-san smiles unpleasantly.

That woman, Yoshimi-san, scowls. Her expression suddenly brings to mind Kiyomi-san’s face after she died in that apartment, twisted in pain.

“...Being a younger wife comes with many hardships,” Yoshimi-san replies with a look of obvious displeasure on her face.

Regardless of how she looks now, it’s Yoshimi-san who is still alive, not Kiyomi-san. She’s trying not to let Sakurako-san provoke her.

“But it’s not so hard that it’s not worthwhile, right? Is it the money?”

“It has nothing to do with money.”

“It hasn’t been that long since your sister and her fiance died. How are you planning to off him this time?”

“Even if I don’t do anything… He doesn’t have long left.”

“You’ve done well to sneak your way in, then. I wonder if he knows what kind of person you are?” Sakurako-san’s snickers.

Yoshimi-san can’t take any more abuse. She takes a deep breath, but holds her tongue.

“We’re not really that wealthy. In fact, there probably won’t be much left for me at all. I work at a nearby cafe in the evenings,” she says bitterly, thinking about how she’ll live after her husband passes. “Are you trying to blackmail me? You think I murdered my sister, so now you’re going to threaten to tell my husband? Why? Even if you asked for money-”

“No, we don’t want money. We just want to use you.”

“Use me?”

“No, perhaps I should have said that we need your cooperation.”

“Huh?” Yoshimi-san and I both speak at the same time.

Yoshimi-san notices my surprise, and shoots me a suspicious glance. I don't like it when she looks at me like that. She reluctantly takes a deep breath.

"...What do you want from me? All I want to do is live a peaceful, quiet life. I haven't hurt anyone, and I don't want to." Her voice is quiet, and tinged with sadness. I don't sense any of her anger from earlier.

It doesn't sound like she's lying, so I wait for Sakurako-san to reply.

"It's simple. All you have to do is help us find what we're looking for."

"You're looking for something?"

"Yes. I want you and your husband to leave the house for a few hours, and give us a spare key."

"What?" Yoshimi-san and I both say in surprise.

Sakurako-san laughs at us. It's an innocent, bouncing laugh.

"That's it. Easy, right? Even just one hour is enough. We just need to look around your house."

"Sakurako-san! That's trespassing!"

"That's why I'm getting permission from one of the occupants."

She seems taken aback that I'm shocked, even though she's the one being ridiculous.

"You're basically blackmailing me!" As expected, Yoshimi-san is appalled.

"Blackmail? That's not the term I would use, hahaha."

"No matter how you look at it, this is definitely blackmail."

Unfortunately, I'm talking to Sakurako Kujou here. As much as I hate it, I know she isn't joking. I'm sure Yoshimi-san remembers how absurd Sakurako-san can be.

"...She may sound insane, but that's how smart people are. Only a nightingale can understand the song of another nightingale," Yoshimi-san mumbles, still in shock.

"I don't want to ruin your marriage or anything, I'm just looking for a certain doll, and I think your husband might be hiding it somewhere."

"A doll?"

“Yes, an American doll. It isn’t worth much money. If you don’t have a spare key, I don’t mind if you look for the doll in my stead.”

Sakurako-san stares at Yoshimi-san expectantly. Yoshimi-san doesn’t reply at first, and bites her lip. I’m sure she’ll say no.

“Sakurako-san, you’re asking too mu-”

“Okay.”

We speak in unison for the third time, so I don’t hear her very well.

“Huh?” I glance at Yoshimi-san. She looks like she’s made up her mind.

“I don’t know if it’s related to your doll or not, but there’s something that I’m curious about.”

“What is it?”

“There’s a suitcase inside the closet in the study. It’s always locked, and I’m not supposed to touch it.”

“Can you steal it?”

“No. He absolutely never lets me touch it. He always takes it with him when he goes out. Maybe he just thinks of me as his personal nurse,” Yoshimi-san says with a faint, self-deprecating smile.

Perhaps that’s one of the “hardships of being a younger wife” that she mentioned.

“I’ll… make a snowman, then.”

“A snowman?”

Sakurako-san blinks slowly.

“Yeah. I’ll make it near the front door, and put the spare key inside. Today… We’re going out to eat at 6pm, so you can do as you’d like after that.”

“But that’s…” As I’m about to tell her she doesn’t have to go that far, Yoshimi-san quickly interrupts me.

“It’s fine. After all, I don’t know what you’ll do if I refuse…”

I sigh in resignation.

“That’ll give you two hours. I can’t give you any more than that. Look carefully so my husband doesn’t notice, then never let me see you again.”

I have mixed feelings about the fact that Yoshimi-san, who I feel some hatred for, is living in a quiet place under the control of her elderly husband. She doesn't face much adversity in life, and she has a bright future. Of course, that doesn't mean she doesn't feel affection for her older spouse, Osanaga-san.

However, the beautiful and charming Yoshimi-san I met when Kiyomi-san died has undergone an unimaginable transformation. It's hard to bring myself to care about the person who drove Kiyomi-san to death, but it's plain to see how drastically her life has changed since then. After causing the death of her family member, she was left with no job and nowhere to live, as a natural punishment **.** On the other hand, what she did wasn't exactly a crime. She fell in love with her sister's fiance. A man who was about to be married. That goes against basic morals. However–

"What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh… it's nothing."

We're quietly taking a break in the shadows a bit away from Osanaga-san's house where Yoshimi-san lives. Sakurako-san leans over to try and see my expression as I'm lost in reverie while hugging my knees, not even bothering to look at my phone. I quickly turn away from her.

"A-anyway… Are we really doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Isn't sneaking into someone's house normally a crime?"

"We got permission from an occupant."

"Permission… You call that permission?"

That was absolutely blackmail. We're disrupting the lives of someone who is living a quiet life, hiding from her past.

"It's not like I asked you to come."

"What are you talking about? I can't let you go alone."

Especially because I don't know what she'd do if she were left alone. We end up spending over an hour waiting in the car. I listen to Diavel's singing while I look at Sakurako-san's reflection in the window. It's winter, so the sun goes down early. The dark, withered trees against the light grey snow makes me feel lonely. Diavel's shouting sounds like the wind howling during a blizzard. I suddenly

realize that for the rest of my life, I'll think of Sakurako-san every time I hear this song. Perhaps it's because of the comfortable warmth, or because of Sakurako-san's silence, but I end up falling asleep.

"Wake up, boy."

Sakurako-san shakes my shoulder. I come to my senses just in time to see a car leaving the house. We wait for the length of 3 more songs to make sure they're not coming back, then Sakurako-san dims the lights and slowly drives up to the house. To make sure nobody is home, I check that all the lights are off.

In front of the entrance is a palm-sized snowman, sitting all alone. Sakurako-san picks it up, then ruthlessly smashes it on the ground. It breaks apart with a muffled sound. I use the flashlight on my phone to find the key. It doesn't have a keychain with it, but there's a thin, blue plate that says "entrance" on it. It must be a spare key.

"She must really be scared that her husband will find out," Sakurako-san snickers.

She picks up the key, then wipes the snow and water off on her chest. I avert my gaze. The fact that Yoshimi-san left the house and gave us a key is proof that she wants to protect her current life. She's happy now. Completely unaware of my complex feelings, Sakurako-san unlocks the door and steps inside. She's about to start heading in with her shoes on, but then clicks her tongue.

"If we leave footprints, he'll find out."

"You sure care about the details."

If she thinks so, then it must be right. She takes off her ankle boots, then walks in like she owns the place. We can't turn on the lights, so we have to get by only using the flashlight on my phone. As soon as I close the door, silence and darkness envelops us.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"What would we do if we turned back?"

"Yeah, but…"

The lavender air freshener makes it smell different from my house, making me feel even more hesitant. But now that we've come this far, we'd still be guilty of trespassing even if we turned back.

There's no choice but to find the suitcase as soon as possible. The inside of the house is basically a maze, since we can't see anything.

"She said it was in the study," Sakurako-san says as we pass through the living room.

"Yeah, I think she said it was in the closet…"

Since she said it was the study, it's probably a room with lots of books. I open the nearest door and peek inside. It smells graceful and sweet. It looks like it's Yoshimi-san's room, so I quickly shut the door. The next room looks like Osanaga-san's bedroom.

Even though we're not here to steal or do anything bad, I still feel extremely guilty to be walking around a stranger's house without permission. Maybe it's more like disgust than guilt. My moral compass keeps ringing the alarm bells, since I know I'm doing something that isn't right. Sakurako-san clearly has no idea what I'm thinking about, since she just keeps telling me to shine my light into different rooms.

"The study should have a lot of books, right? Then wouldn't it be facing North? In Jinbocho, the city of books, the shops all face North."

If the room faces South, the books will be exposed to sunlight. They'd build it to face North to avoid damaging the books. I'm only suggesting it because I want to get out of here as soon as possible.

"I see. That's a good deduction for you. Try this door, then," Sakurako-san says with a rising whistle. It's one of her rare compliments (?).

She then points at the door directly across from Osanaga-san's room. We haven't checked in there yet. Sakurako-san looks back at me through the darkness, like she's asking, "can I open it?"

I nod, so she gently pulls down on the doorknob. Luckily, it isn't locked, and opens easily. Slightly cold air brushes past my forehead.

"…"

I shine my light around to confirm that it is the study. The faint light of the snow peeking through a gap in the curtains leaves a thin shadow along a shelf with glass doors. Behind the glass doors are some files, and an old encyclopedia. The bookshelf next to it has materials related to Asahikawa and Hokkaido, some hardcover

books, and a few books that look like they're from a foreign country. Across from that is a shelf with books by famous authors that even I've heard of, some historical novels, and other books that give a better insight to Osanaga-san's personality. Still, the way that each book is neatly stored away and organized shows more of his personality than the actual contents of the books.

"The closet, boy." Sakurako-san tells me to shine my light on the wall instead of the bookshelves.

The heat in here is turned down to avoid drying the room out, so it's quieter and colder than the rest of the house. My hands are shaking, though it might just be from nervousness.

"Oh."

As I slowly move the light around, I notice a handle on the wall near the paperback book shelf. Looking closer, it seems to be a sliding door.

"...What should we do?"

"What do you mean? Open it, of course," Sakurako-san says with an exasperated sigh. She grabs the handle with no hesitation. "Geez, there's so much stuff in here."

As the closet door rattles open, I see that it's crammed full of cardboard boxes. It's not messy, though. It feels methodical. It still looks like it's going to be a lot of work, though.

"Which one is it?"

"I dunno… She said it was a suitcase, right?"

I look into the closet with only the light from my phone between me and the darkness, but at first glance, I don't see any suitcases. I look up at Sakurako-san in the dim light to see her ruthlessly pushing around boxes and rummaging around. Finding the suitcase didn't turn out to be that difficult, though. It was hidden behind a box, but we found it right away.

"Is this it?"

"I'm not sure, but…"

Sakurako-san drags the case out of the closet to take a look at it. It's silver in colour, perhaps it's made of aluminum? I try to open it, but it remains tightly shut.

"...It's locked."

“Mhm.”

There’s a dial lock that needs a four digit number.

“What should we do?”

“It’s only four digits. If you try ten thousand times, it’ll open.”

“T-Ten thousand?!” She says it like it’s no big deal… But seriously, ten thousand?! “Are you really going to start at 0000 and try everything?!”

“So what? Just hold the light. Quit moving.” Sakurako-san moves at her own pace, and gets mad at me for letting my phone shake too much.

“Even at times like these, it’d be better if you had your own phone.”

“I don’t want to sell my freedom for a bit of convenience.”

“It seems pretty inconvenient not having one to me.”

“No, you’re all enslaved by those tiny machines. It’s horrifying.”

Speaking of horrifying, is she seriously going to keep trying the dial ten thousand times? Even though I think it’s the height of madness, I’ve always known she’s not normal. Sometimes, there’s no choice but to listen to her.

“Oh.” As I obediently shine the light on it, I notice something.

“What is it?”

“My phone’s battery is…” Before I knew it, it’s already at 3%.

“So it’s completely useless when it matters most?”

“You didn’t tell me we were going to do this in the first place!”

Well, I’m already committing a crime, so I might as well steal some electricity while I’m at it. I’ll apologize for it later.

“Just wait a second, I have a charger. Let me just find an outlet…”

There must be one somewhere… As soon as I hold up my flashlight, the lights in the room come on. Oh, there’s one right in front of me… My momentary relief instantly turns into a chill.

“U-u-uh…”

I nervously turn my head to the door. Osanaga-san is standing there with a stern expression. Yoshimi-san is behind him, looking apologetic.

“If you leave right now, I won’t call the police.” Osanaga-san is glaring at us angrily, of course. He looks imposing.

“That’s very generous of you, but I don’t care if you call them.”

“S-Sakurako-san…”

She gives Osanaga-san a brief glance, then goes back to playing with the lock.

“I don’t want any trouble. If you leave, I’ll overlook this.”

“I don’t really care, though.”

Osanaga-san runs out of patience. He clenches his fists, strides over to Sakurako-san, and yells, “hey! That’s enough!”

“...”

I’m scared he’ll hurt her, so I slide myself between them, but Osanaga-san looks surprised and hesitant. Yoshimi-san clings to her husband’s back like she’s trying to stop him. Sakurako-san lifts her head, but ignores Osanaga-san in favour of looking at the wooden closet door. His expression isn’t as angry as I expected. He looks dismayed, like he’s about to cry.

“Sakurako-san! You have to stop this!”

“Stupid,” she laughs.

“What?”

“I said your password is stupid… Am I wrong, sensei?” Her laugh is snarky and unpleasant, but at least it’s not aimed at me.

Sakurako-san moves the suitcase between Osanaga-san and me. She kneels on the floor in front of it and smiles up at us.

“Passwords shouldn’t have a meaning.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Especially not anniversaries or birthdays.”

“Wh…?!” Osanaga-san is about to yell at Sakurako-san again, but she raises her palm to him.

“Hey, don’t you like stories with a lesson in them? This is just like that.” Sakurako-san smiles as her long, beautiful fingers turn the dial.

The dial makes a small ticking sound as it turns. We watch carefully, holding our breath. 0300… 0301… 0302… 0303. Click.

“Don’t you think so, vice principal?” Sakurako-san opens the suitcase with a daring smile.

The password was 0303. March 3rd. That's An's birthday. As well as the day that the friendship doll was given to her.

"Now then… Could you please tell me about this doll?" Sakurako-san picks up the doll from underneath the clothes and documents being used to conceal it. It's a small, old, foreign-made doll.

Part 15

"What should I say? Where should I start? Whose story should I tell? When should I start?" Osanaga-san says in a hoarse voice, his hollow eyes cast downward.

"None of that is necessary. We're only after An." Sakurako-san frowns and wrinkles her nose.

"Everything follows a path, and has a cause," the vice principal says, but Sakurako-san just shrugs.

It's true, everything has bones. Whether it's a solid femur, or a brittle rib. Osanaga-san gently takes the old doll from Sakurako-san, and invites us to the living room. The shabby looking, frizzy hair and celluloid texture make the friendship doll seem cheap. Still, thanks to Osanaga-san's careful handling, you can still tell that it has historical value. The four of us sit on the couches. Yoshimi-san brings out coffee again, but nobody ends up taking a cup.

"... An didn't do anything wrong from the beginning," Osanaga-san says while pressing on the inner corners of his eyes. The doll is on his lap.

"What was the beginning?" Sakurako-san doesn't change her rude attitude, despite the fact that the haggard figure in front of us is nothing like the man who was trembling with rage earlier.

"When that girl was born… No, even earlier than that. The Ichikawa family has been passing down the blue eyed doll for generations."

"It all started when Beatrice Anne and Victoria Anne came to Hokkaido from overseas," Osanaga-san tells us.

Soon, the war began, and An's great grandmother, Shizu, "killed" the doll with her own hands. That's the way it had to be. Even

though she couldn't help it, Shizu-san couldn't get past her sadness. Chika Ichikawa-san, her grandchild, grew up hearing about her memories from the war, and her regrets. That's the reason Chika-san dedicated herself to the preservation of Victoria Anne. That's what brought her to the United States. However…

"Because… Chika didn't come back to Japan alone, did she?"

"No. She gave birth in Japan. Her belly was already huge by the time she returned. When I asked who the father was, she didn't answer, and just started crying… I'm not sure if she was involved in a crime, but it was certainly an unwanted pregnancy for her."

With her dreams shattered, she gave birth to her daughter shortly after returning. Shizu-san, who had been given a strict upbringing, couldn't forgive her granddaughter or great granddaughter. Unlike her younger brother, who was always causing trouble, Chika-san was wonderful. Shizu-san relied on Chika-san quite a bit due to her age.

She did her best to raise her two grandchildren in place of her own child, who died young. Perhaps she was upset that she had to raise another baby after she'd finally been relieved of that burden, because Shizu-san left the two of them behind to return to Ashibetsu, where she once worked as a teacher when she had to kill Beatrice Anne. I don't think it's right to call her heartless for that. However, I know how hard it was for Chika-san, who was still young, to raise her daughter without the support of her family.

"Chika-san was always exhausted because of the child who ruined her life, and her younger brother's misbehaviour . She felt that her daughter took everything away from her. Her job, her grandmother, and her future… An stole all of that from her."

While she was already struggling with An-san, her younger brother was causing problems and begging for money.

"When Chika suddenly disappeared with her unwanted daughter, I thought she was going to commit double suicide." Osanaga-san leans back into the sofa, covers his eyes with his hand, and takes a deep breath. "When I found out that she was living with An in Ashibetsu, where Shizu-san lived, I was truly relieved, but… I also felt like I had to do something."

“Oh, so then…”

Osanaga-san nods. That’s when she left the inn. Chika-san wasn’t trying to run away from Osanaga-san, she left Ashibetsu with his help. An-san grew up to be a smart girl, so she wanted to send her to the city. She’d have more options there, even if it wasn’t always easier living there.

“I just wanted to help. I’ve been looking after Chika ever since she was a kid. I don’t have a daughter of my own, so I cared for her like she was mine.”

I can’t help but feel sorry for Chika-san, getting so worn out. It’d be nice if she could build a new life for herself. Osanaga-san provided Chika-san with a job that could support her and her daughter.

“But… I guess Chika was already too exhausted…”

Osanaga-san noticed how tired Chika-san was, so he suggested she enroll An-san in summer school in Niseko. It would be good for An-san, too. She could get better at speaking English, so she could maybe go overseas someday like Chika-san did. An-san had also started fighting with Chika-san sometimes ever since she started puberty. Distance can sometimes be good for relationships.

“But… While An was in Niseko, Chika committed suicide…”

Chika-san disappeared, leaving only a suicide note. Her body was never found, but given the circumstances, it’s highly unlikely that she’s alive. Osanaga-san’s voice is so quiet that it’s barely audible. An-san ended up being taken in by a distant relative in Sapporo. Osanaga-san couldn’t get in touch with her after that, and he occasionally heard rumours that she immediately ran away from home or ended up living with some other relative, so he was always worried about her.

“So what’s with this doll?”

“...Nobuhiko, Chika’s younger brother and An’s uncle, stole it to try and make money. Victoria Anne didn’t end up selling, though.”

He grimaces as he tells the unexpected story. Even if the doll is historically valuable, the doll itself is old and cheaply made, so it has little market value.

“Nobuhiko had no other choice but to try to pawn her off to me. Thanks to that, I was able to return Victoria Anne, but he’d also sold off another doll… I spent years tracking it down, and finally got it back, but I missed the right timing to return it.”

“So that’s why you decided to hide it?”

“I was planning on returning it when the time was right.”

The two dolls seemed to have disappeared without a trace. Victoria Anne showed up like a ghost, but it turns out that Osanaga-san just returned her.

“They said you retired because of an embezzlement scandal… Was that also Nobuhiko’s fault?”

Osanaga-san’s mouth twitches a bit. “What makes you think that?”

“Why would you steal money then return it immediately? Besides, you don’t seem like the type of man who would do something so foolish,” Sakurako-san says with a shrug.

Osanaga-san smiles bitterly. “I was able to protect An because I immediately took responsibility for what happened, repaid the money, and resigned… Thinking back on it now, I should have just turned Nobuhiko over to the police…”

He protected Nobuhiko-san so that Ichikawa-san’s precious treasure, An-san, wouldn’t be known as the family member of a criminal. He did all of that to protect her, but she still ended up as a skull inside a bag.

“Do you know Hana Sumiyoshi?”

“Sumiyoshi…?”

“She’s a woman who killed herself at around the same time as this incident. She lived in the Pepan area, too. We thought she might have something to do with Nobuhiko or An. Or even Chika, since she was in her 50s. If Chika were still alive, they would be close in age. Does she sound familiar?”

Osanaga-san stares into space as he thinks. There’s no point in feigning ignorance anymore, so he must actually be trying to think back. Yoshimi-san is sitting next to him. She’s staring into her coffee cup with empty eyes devoid of light. Sakurako-san gets irritated by the silence, so she starts tapping her fingers against her knee.

“Do you remember anything?”

“Well… I remember An had a friend named Sumiyoshi. They met at summer school, and became friends because they were both from Asahikawa. I remember her because An never had many friends her own age. They were close, so they might have kept in contact after growing up.”

“Do you know how to contact her?”

“No, I don’t know that much about An.”

That makes sense. He’s not An-san’s father or anything. In the end, we don’t know if there’s any relation between An-san’s friend and Hana Sumiyoshi, let alone if she had anything to do with Nobuhiko-san. I don’t think we’ll learn much more from Osanaga-san.

Sakurako-san yawns as she leaves the key from the snowman on the living room table. I guess they won’t be reporting us to the police. The two of them walk us to the door.

“Did the man we thought was Nobuhiko come to this house on the day he died?” Sakurako-san asks, but Yoshimi-san says, “no.”

“This house was only built in spring of this year. We didn’t live here back then.”

The house does seem brand new. That also explains all the cardboard boxes in the closet.

“But… If those bones really were from An, does that mean she’ll be buried as someone without any relatives?” Osanaga-san says behind us as we put on our shoes to leave.

“I suppose so. An hasn’t been reported missing in the first place. It’s unlikely she has any relatives who are searching for her,” Sakurako-san replies as she tightens her shoelace.

Osanaga-san’s expression grows cloudy.

“I was the one who recommended that Chika studied abroad. She was a smart girl with lots of dreams. She was worried, but I pushed her to do it… And because of that, she lost her life. It’s my fault that she committed suicide, which caused An to grow up unhappy…”

Once again, Osanaga-san presses on the inner corners of his eyes. None of us can find the words to say to him, so Yoshimi-san

wraps her arms around him.

“It’s sad what happened to her… But it’s still an encounter worth treasuring. Let’s at least take her remains.”

Yoshimi-san whispers to her husband that he’ll be in the grave, too, in the near future.. She drops her gaze, as if she’s given up on something. I hate myself for feeling relieved when I see the pain on her face.

The ride home is quiet. Besides His Excellency, Diavel’s shouting, of course.

“That was kind of anticlimactic,” I say as I lower the stereo’s volume a bit. “So they really weren’t related, after all?”

Sakurako-san doesn’t reply.

“...Sakurako-san?”

“The bones aren’t connecting,” she mutters. She’s holding the steering wheel tight and staring straight ahead.

“You mean, like… Where are the rest of her bones?”

“And why did An Ichikawa lie about her address?”

“Oh, well… Maybe that was just a mistake?”

“Why would Chika Ichikawa’s brother go to Osanaga, a complete stranger, to ask for money? It sounded like he actually expected Osanaga to give him some, too.”

“...That’s true.”

The money thing could be chalked up to protecting An-san or something, but the part about her address seems weird.

“And that second doll… Is it okay to leave it like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s historically important, isn’t it?”

“That’s not for us to interfere with.”

“Yeah, but still…”

“The bones are the only thing that matters to me,” she says curtly.

If he suddenly returned the doll, someone might find out that Osanaga-san was the one who had it. It’s not hard to see why he’s been waiting for the right timing.

On the way back, Sakurako-san stops by the house where Sumiyoshi-san lived. There's nothing there, of course. Just an empty house and a small, decaying torii.

"How do you think Himetataraisuzu-hime-no-Mikoto's mother felt when she suddenly became pregnant?" I mumble as I watch the darkened scenery go by.

"What?"

"In myths and legends, it's normal for babies to be conceived and born without any context, but reality doesn't work that way."

In fact, it caused Chika Ichikawa so much suffering that she killed herself.

"...When a child is unexpectedly born, the 'mother' is often blamed for not taking responsibility and raising the child, even if it wasn't her fault. If she doesn't sacrifice herself in all kinds of ways, the baby could easily die."

It's not easy to raise a child alone, even if you had them with someone you truly loved. Creating a life isn't a "sin", but it's sad that the mothers are blamed for it.

"I feel sorry for Chika Ichikawa-san… But I wonder what An-san thought about her birth and her mother's struggles."

"They're both their own people. Everyone thinks about things differently," Sakurako-san replies bluntly.

Sakurako-san didn't get along very well with her mother. Maybe this is a difficult topic for her.

"Right… Anyway, won't it be hard to convince the police to reinvestigate this?" I hurriedly try to change the topic.

I get goosebumps when I think about how close we're getting to the heart of this case, but I also wonder if we should leave it to the professionals.

"There's no chance unless we have a stronger case. The police aren't going to want to reopen a case that was already determined to not be criminal. Right now, everything is neatly covered up."

"...What about that tanuki-looking detective? Or Utsumi-san…"

"Oh, from that time with Yuriko. Well, he does seem to have a moral backbone. If we gather enough evidence, he might be able to help us overturn it. We still don't have enough parts to put together

the skeleton yet, though. Anyway, this would be too heavy of a burden for Utsumi." The first thing we have to do is pick up the scattered bone fragments, Sakurako-san says.

I guess we can't just ask Ariwara-san, either. I get where she's coming from, but it feels like she's treating this case as a toy she doesn't want to let go of. The way she sounds like she's having so much fun as she talks about the incident makes me feel strangely torn.

Perhaps that's why I had such a lonely dream as I dozed off on the way home. Canadian World, deserted in winter. In the empty church, illuminated by the light streaming through the stained glass window, the young An-san from the photo is sitting next to the dolls she created as she looks at the blue eyed doll in her arms and cries.

My mom, lively as ever, gently teases me for looking so depressed when I get home. She must have gone through a lot to raise me, too. I'm so lucky. Rather than being happy, though, I feel my chest tighten. The hidden doll, An-san, and Chika-san. And Yoshimi-san, who lives in hiding. Maybe it's because I fell asleep in the car, but there's so many hazy thoughts swirling around inside of me that I couldn't sleep until the early hours of the morning.

Part 16

When we phoned Yakuwa-san to tell him about the situation on the way back from Osanaga-san's house, he seemed really disapproving. I lie to him, telling him that we just happened to know the wife already, and she called us back later. He probably doesn't believe me. I regret needing to lie to him. I can tell from his voice on the other end of the phone that the trust and connection we had started to build was coming apart. I don't know what I should have done. Yakuwa-san would never let us sneak into someone's house.

"I did some research. While Chika Ichikawa was attending summer school, at the same time a person named Saya Sumiyoshi was."

The next evening, Yakuwa-san comes to Asahikawa to visit us. I wonder if he's happy with how the case is progressing. It always

surprises me how adaptable he is. We're at our usual tea shop today. Sakurako-san invited him into our territory… No, that's not it. She probably just wanted to eat caramel ice cream.

"Didn't the landlord say that Hana Sumiyoshi was a widow?" Sakurako-san asks as she takes a spoonful of delicious looking vanilla ice cream that's drenched in homemade, bittersweet caramel sauce.

"I don't know for sure, but that's what she told the people around her, at least," Yakuwa-san replies while sipping the tea I recommended.

He doesn't seem to want to eat the scones and chiffon cake. Won't having nothing but tea make his stomach hurt?

"Is something wrong?"

I'm worried about him not eating. I hold out a black soybean scone for him, but he refuses before urging Sakurako-san to respond.

"It's not a big deal, but… Those two are both fatherless, then?"

"If so, is that a problem?"

By "those two," they mean An-san and Saya-san. I know that, but for a moment, I thought they meant me. I have mixed feelings.

"No, it's just that single-mother households tend to have low incomes. I was wondering why they paid so much money to send their children to summer school, and where that money came from. Hana Sumiyoshi didn't seem wealthy, at least." Sakurako-san adds that she didn't exactly seem impoverished, either.

"Maybe they just cared a lot about education?"

"Well… I can't deny that possibility."

I don't even know which girl is Saya-san in the group photo that Yakuwa-san procured. I let out a sigh. It looks like we'll need to spend a little bit of time looking into Saya-san.

"So… What are you going to do now, Yakuwa-san?"

"Me?"

"You must be able to tell we're not criminals by now. We've also found out quite a bit about An-san's life, even if we don't know much about Hana Sumiyoshi-san."

"Well… I have enough to write an article, I suppose…"

Even if he does write the article, it'll probably only be published locally, if the editor lets it get published in the first place. I can tell from the hesitation in his voice that he's not completely satisfied with the information he's gotten, but he doesn't want to say something negative to us.

"An-san lived a strange life… There's her mom, her great grandma, and the friendship doll, too… I'm sure someone out there wants her story to be written down so it can be remembered,"

I scoop some cream onto my scone with the tip of my spoon. It leaves a white streak. Soft and vague, like a person's memories. It easily vanishes once something else comes along.

"I feel like if we let Hana Sumiyoshi-san be forgotten, it'll be like she never existed at all."

Even if her story is written in the newspaper, it's not like everyone will remember her, but there might be at least one person who keeps her in a quiet corner of their memory. They might remember her because of a slight resemblance to someone they know, or out of sympathy. Even if nobody does remember the story, it'll still be kept forever in a library or database.

"Are you really so foolish as to think a story disappears just because it isn't actively being remembered?" Sakurako-san scoffs.

She can't understand my sentimentality. I can't help but smile bitterly, since I'm used to her, but Yakuwa-san furrows his brow. The truth isn't always perfectly clear. The "bones" we find don't always take a nice, clean shape. In the end, all we learned is that there was a woman who lived a sad life, and there were dolls destroyed by human hands. The mystery of the friend Sumiyoshi-san is still unsolved, but there's a good chance it's a coincidence. It just so happened that someone committed suicide on the same day as the accident, that's all. The truth is stranger than fiction, as they say.

"So… What are you going to do now? Have we cleared our suspicions of us? Are you going back to Sapporo?" I ask Yakuwa-san after he pays the bill.

I feel uneasy for some reason, and also a bit lonely to be parting with him after we started to become closer.

“Are you… Saying you don’t want me to go back?” He replies while he looks at all of the brand name teas lined up by the register.

“I didn’t like being treated like a criminal, but… I feel a bit disappointed,” I say with an embarrassed grin.

Yakuwa-san glances at me. I feel silly for saying something now, so I look down. He starts walking toward the exit, but he pats my shoulder as he passes by me.

“I’ll take you home.”

He leans against the door to open it, and beckons me through. The corners of his mouth are turned up, like he’s smiling.

“Wah!”

Sakurako-san, who can’t understand emotional moments, ruthlessly pushes past me so she can leave the store. Since the tile floor is a little wet from the snow, I slip and almost fall over. I manage to land on one knee. If I hadn’t grabbed onto Yakuwa-san, I would have fallen down completely. I turn to look at Sakurako-san. She laughs and holds out a paper bag.

“It’s a souvenir for you. I often go to Sapporo, but the tea and scones here are better.”

Yakuwa-san suddenly bursts into laughter. His smile is crooked, like he’s embarrassed or annoyed.

“I’m not happy with you pushing people when it’s so slippery in winter.”

Yakuwa-san brushes the muddy slush off my knee with his hand. My body swings a bit with each rhythmic pat . Suddenly, I hear a strange scraping noise.

“Hm?” Even stranger, the sound seems to be coming from my coat pocket. “...Ah.”

I didn’t notice because I don’t usually use my pockets very much. I slowly slide my hand into my pocket. I feel a cold, unfamiliar, metallic object and pull it out. It’s a key. It looks familiar. The label is gone, with only a thin piece of wire left behind.

“What…? Why is this here?”

I hold the key up to the light to get a better look at it. It’s the key to Yoshimi-san and Osanaga-san’s house.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just… This is Yoshimi-san’s–”

I show Sakurako-san the key with a puzzled expression. This is weird. I’m sure that I saw Sakurako-san leave the key in the living room–

“...It can’t be...”

“Sakurako-san?”

Before my doubts can take shape, Sakurako-san starts to panic and hurries back to her car.

“Boy! Yakuwa! Hurry up!” Sakurako-san shouts. Her expression is grim, and she looks strangely pale.

“What? Why…? What happened?!”

Sakurako-san doesn’t answer any of our questions as she drives recklessly. She’s lucky she didn’t get a speeding ticket, or get in a crash. After about 5 minutes, I start to get an idea of where we’re going. She’s headed for Osanaga-san’s house. I’m once again reminded that when I get a bad feeling, something always goes wrong.

Sakurako-san stops the car in front of the Osanaga house. There’s a pastel green kei car parked there, too. It’s already covered in a thin layer of snow. It looks like Yoshimi-san’s car, so she must be home. I start to feel anxious as we head toward the front door. I notice that there’s another small snowman sitting there.

“...!”

She picks it up, and violently smashes it on the ground.

“Boy! The key–”

The front door is locked, of course. I hand her the key before she can finish yelling at me. After flinging open the door, I find that the house is strangely quiet, and colder than last time I was here. Rather than the house smelling like lavender, it smells like incomplete combustion and burning oil.

“...Find the two of them! And ventilate the house!”

Yakuwa-san and I start moving at almost the same moment Sakurako-san shouts. I barge straight into the house and start calling Yoshimi-san’s name. There’s no reply. My chest is burning with anxiety.

I always got the feeling that Kiyomi-san liked being in the kitchen. Maybe I have the same association with Yoshimi-san, since I run for the kitchen right away. I open up the living room windows en route. Just as I expected, as soon as I burst into the kitchen I see an old heater with a red light on, indicating incomplete combustion. Behind it, Yoshimi-san is lying limply on the floor.

"S-Sakurako-san!" I hurriedly shout at the same moment that Sakurako-san rushes in.

"Yakuwa! Help!" she shouts.

I compose myself, and lift up Yoshimi-san. Even a slender person is heavy when they're unconscious. We quickly lay her down on the two-person couch in the living room, which has gotten even colder from the outside air. I've seen corpses countless times, but her cheeks are still pink, and she's definitely breathing. I'm relieved. However…

"..."

Her breathing is odd, like her lower jaw is lifted. I don't know how to explain it, but her inhalations are short, and her breaths are irregular. I've seen this before somewhere.

"..."

I raise my head and look around the room. On the table is the glass bottle decorated with pink gerberas from the Chick Pudding I brought– and I suddenly remember.

"Oh… Ahh!"

I panickedly shout for Sakurako-san. She's performing chest compressions on Osanaga-san in the bedroom. Yakuwa-san is next to her, calling an ambulance.

"Yoshimi-san's breathing is weird! It's irregular, like she's hiccuping… My grandma did that just before she died! It doesn't seem like her lungs are working properly!"

Sakurako-san's expression darkens instantly upon hearing that.

"Yakuwa! Another person is in cardiac arrest! Shoutarou, give her chest compressions right away! She's not actually breathing, it's called gasping, it happens during cardiac arrest!"

I start moving before she finishes talking. I know how to do it. Sakurako-san taught me, and there was a class about it at school

once. Most importantly, I've seen Sakurako-san do it many times. I'm worried, of course. What if I break one of her ribs and it punctures her heart? But I can't hesitate.

I kneel on the ground, and put my hands on Yoshimi-san's chest in the most comfortable way possible. Right in the middle of her chest. I hold the palm of one hand near the wrist of my other and straighten my posture. The rhythm should be the same as the theme song from the Anpan hero anime I liked as a kid. My whole body immediately feels like it's screaming. But I can't stop. Right now, I am Yoshimi-san's heart. I can't let her heart stop. As soon as the heart stops, cells start to die. That's the beginning of the end.

Sweat pours out from my entire body, even though the living room is cold. The sweat from my forehead is running down my back instead of my throat. Sweating usually feels good, but today it's just in the way. It hurts. All I can hear is the sound of my own ragged breathing, and my heart pounding in my ears. I don't know how long it's been. Maybe it hasn't been as long as it feels like. How many times have I repeated that song in my head? 10 times? 12? More?

"I'll take over."

Before I notice she's there, Sakurako-san runs over and takes my place. I'm about to fall over, but Yakuwa-san holds me up. It's so hard to breathe that I feel like I'm going to pass out. I think Sakurako-san is the one who told me that the more people around to do chest compressions, the higher the survival rate. I hazily look over at Sakurako-san as she frantically applies pressure. The act of saving a life is so intense and painful. I can't do it alone. The same goes for Sakurako-san. Yakuwa-san takes her place, then I take his. We're all hurting, but none of us say it.

We continue to switch out while we wait for the ambulance to arrive. I feel more at ease now that I have the two of them with me, but then I realize what that means. Why did they stop doing chest compressions on Osanaga-san…? They made a decision that will no doubt haunt them. They chose to make sure at least one of them survived. The fact that they had to choose to do that, the life that's been lost, and the whole situation we're in makes me sad. I find myself crying while I act as Yoshimi-san's heart, trying to keep her

alive. We have to save her, no matter what. Eventually, I can hear the sound of sirens approaching. I notice Sakurako-san let out a small sigh of relief.

"...You did well to notice her gasping, Shoutarou. Well done. I'm proud of your growth." Her voice is hoarse and faint, but Sakurako-san is definitely praising me.

My tears are pouring out, but I can't stop yet. Not until Yoshimi-san is safely with the paramedics. I can't let her heart stop. I have to keep moving. As I watch the seconds hand on the clock tick by, I realize the true weight of human life.

It turns out that it really was a surprisingly short time. The two adults respond to the ambulance, and handle things smoothly. I'm completely exhausted, so I sit in the corner and hug my knees so that I don't get in anyone's way. The way Sakurako-san handles herself is especially orderly. I usually just think of her as the type of person who doesn't get anxious easily, but at times like this, I'm especially envious of her ability to stay calm and be reliable.

As they take Yoshimi-san away, I notice that her fingernails are painted the same colour as her skin. I get deja vu. At first, I figure that it's just because I'm tired, but then I remember. Kiyomi-san used to paint her nails the same way. For some reason, that realization makes me extremely sad. I feel bad for hating Yoshimi-san after Kiyomi-san died. Yakuwa-san pats my back to comfort me as I burst into tears again.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," he says.

He must think I'm worried about her. My feelings are more complex and messy than that, but I don't think I could explain them well.

After trying to save Osanaga-san and Yoshimi-san together, I feel a lot more trust in Yakuwa-san. Yakuwa-san gets into the ambulance as the one person allowed as an escort. He says that he'll take care of all the troublesome parts for me. We should go back to our everyday lives. There's nothing else I can do here, and above all else, I just want to go home now. As I climb into Sakurako-

san’s car, I feel extremely weak. She wordlessly hands me a brown envelope.

“Hm?”

“Read what’s inside,” she says as she starts the engine.

I lower the volume of His Excellency Diavel’s voice a bit, and open the envelope. There’s a single piece of paper inside.

“It's all my fault. I killed them. Please let An and the dolls join me in my grave.”

“Is this a suicide note?”

“Honestly. Yoshimi said that he was sick and didn’t have long left to live anyway… If he wanted to die, he should have done it in a way that wouldn’t inconvenience anyone.” Sakurako-san sighs and glances at the back seat.

“Was… It okay for you to take this?”

“It’s fine. Actually, they probably wanted us to take it.”

I follow Sakurako-san’s line of sight. The suitcase from yesterday is sitting in the back seat.

“Wh…?! You didn’t just take the note, but the suitcase, too?!”

“It’s not like the owner can complain anymore,” she says with a strangely meek expression on her face.

“You…”

At least she tried to save his life, even though she knew he couldn’t be resuscitated,

“But, well… The fact that the suitcase was left with the suicide note means it was left for us. There’s no need to feel guilty.”

“...”

With that, she immediately drives away. I suppose it’s best if we don’t stay in front of Osanaga-san’s house any longer. After driving for several minutes, she stops the car in a large parking lot by the supermarket.

“Now, then,” Sakurako-san murmurs as she folds down the back seat to make more space.

She opens the suitcase right away, as if she’s done it 1000 times. The same American doll from yesterday is on top.

“Sakurako-san?”

“Dolls.”

“Hm?”

“The suicide note said ‘dolls.’ It was plural.”

After handing the doll to me, she sifts through the contents of the case. Soon, her hands stop.

“...Woah.”

“...Is there another friendship doll in there?”

If so, I wonder where it came from. Was it stolen from somewhere, or is it a replica… Sakurako-san turns back to me.

“Doesn’t look like this is the doll.”

“What… do you mean?”

Sakurako-san grins at my question.

“It’s the second one.”

“Second wha–”

“Now, which one did Osanaga kill?” Sakurako-san says with a mischievous wink.

She takes something out of the suitcase wrapped in a white towel. Inside the torn cloth is the old, light brown skull of a woman.

Of course Sakurako-san wants the skull, but naturally, that can’t happen. She reluctantly hands the skull from the suitcase over to the police.

Yoshimi-san managed to survive, but Osanaga-san had already passed. It wasn’t a forced double suicide or a murder, just the vice principal’s own suicide. Upon returning home from work, Yoshimi-san found her husband dead. In a fit of despair, she tried to take her own life, as well. The police praise us for what we did to save Yoshimi-san, but we have a hard time explaining how we know her. It was especially difficult for her to explain why she didn’t foresee the suicide.

After a little over a week, my life returned to normal. Talking with my best friend, Imai, arguing with Azechi, and getting forced into helping Isozaki-sensei with annoying jobs after school. After that, I study hard with Kougami almost every day. I want to just forget everything and focus on my entrance exams, but there’s still all sorts of things smoldering in my heart.

Right now the thing I'm most concerned about, the one I can't forget, is Yoshimi-san. The sensations when I was desperately trying to save her life. The pain and the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears still linger. But, what if? What kind of life would Yoshimi-san be living if Kiyomi-san's fiancee hadn't committed suicide after her death? Maybe Yoshimi-san would have taken her own life. The entrance and her clothes had the same lavender scent that Kiyomi-san wore. The same skin-coloured nail polish. Her everyday life was filled with memories of her older sister.

With Christmas next week, the whole city feels lively. The craziest part is that the skull we found in Osanaga-san's house seems to be criminal in nature. I have mixed feelings about An-san and the others being put in the spotlight again after they were just being forgotten about, and I hate it. I should want their story to be told, rather than forgotten.

Yakuwa-san comes to me so he can write up his report. Seeing his face as we sit around the circular table at the usual tea shop makes me feel strangely nostalgic, and kind of happy. I like the occasional kindness he shows despite his poker face.

"DNA tests show that the hit and run victim and the skulls of the two women are related by blood. The skull from the suitcase is likely Chika Ichikawa. It's likely she was strangled, and there's traces that she was then dismembered."

An-san aside, Chika-san has been dead for a long time. With Osanaga-san also gone, getting the full story won't be simple.

"Then maybe Nobuhiko-san was blackmailing him because he knew who killed Chika-san."

"Right, it's likely he killed An as well. Yoshimi said Nobuhiko's accident occurred before she moved into her new house, but Yakuwa's investigation showed that the house had just been rebuilt, but they had lived there for several years… He may have had the house rebuilt not just because he was getting married, but also to hide any evidence of his previous murders."

Would he really go that far, I wonder? But if his crimes were exposed, he would lose everything. Besides, he may have wanted to bury everything when he started living with Yoshimi-san.

“So Osanaga-san was the culprit behind everything?”

Yakuwa-san looks down at his darjeeling tea, looking unconvinced.

“These are just possibilities. It sounds a little too convenient, though.”

“I don’t feel like the motive is very clear. Sakurako-san told me before that murderers have a desire before killing someone. Osanaga-san didn’t seem to have that.”

“Motive, huh? You’re right, I can’t see where the intent to kill three people would come from.”

Sakurako-san assumes her usual pose with tented fingers as she tries to piece together the skeleton in her head.

“It’s not uncommon for people to kill because of love and selfishness,” Yakuwa-san says quietly as he looks at Sakurako-san.

“I find it hard to believe that that man killed multiple people due to love… It just doesn’t feel right. Something seems dislocated.”

“Dislocated?”

“The information doesn’t line up right,” Sakurako-san says before putting a big scoop of ice cream in her mouth.

How does she not get brain freeze from that?

“Why did An lie? Why did the vice principal kill Chika?”

Sakurako-san stares out the window, like she’s looking for answers. It’s 4pm and it’s almost christmas, so it’s dusk. The time of dogs and wolves. We can’t even see the faces of the people outside the window, let alone any answers.

“Killing a person isn’t as easy as killing a doll. They struggle, fight back, and suffer. They resist with all their strength. Strangulation requires a much stronger intent to kill than methods that use a tool, like stabbing. You have to kill them with your own two hands.”

“Maybe her younger brother is the culprit?” I suggest, but Sakurako-san shakes her head.

“His sister was basically a gold mine to him. Why kill her and not take the money?”

“Maybe he tried to beat her up but got carried away… He was a man of high social standing. Maybe he went too far with his desire

for control?”

“Hmm.”

Yakuwa-san’s deduction seems more reasonable to Sakurako-san than mine. She folds her hands and groans.

“...An was only 11 years old.”

“You mean… When Chika-san disappeared?”

It happened before she was in middle school, so that’s about right.

“I don’t know when she reached sexual maturity, but from the pictures, she seemed to be in good shape. In contrast, her mother’s skull shows that she was quite dainty.”

She hasn’t finished eating, but she pushes her caramel ice cream toward me. She rests her elbows on the table, and makes her hands into a triangle in front of her forehead.

“Sakurako-san… What the hell are you talking about?”

The wrinkle between her eyebrows makes my heart feel gritty.

“This is just a hypothesis, but it connects the bones in a way that fits… Consider the timeline of events. Did An’s mother really disappear while she was away at summer school? What if it was the other way around? Boy, weren’t you talking the other day about Isuzu-Hime-no-Mikoto and her mother Seyadatara-hime?”

A woman who suddenly became pregnant with a god’s baby and gave birth to an inhuman child.

“Chika was robbed of her promising future when she gave birth to her daughter. What did she think of her daughter as she raised her? How did the daughter feel about living in secret, moving from place to place, and having an appearance that made her stand out from her peers? Especially with a mother who was exhausted and resented her.”

“N… No…”

“I don’t know if she hated her or loved her. Perhaps she thought that there was no way she could keep living like that. No, maybe the exhausted mother tried to kill her daughter first, then-”

Sakurako-san’s white fingers dance through the air, slowly grabbing something invisible and crushing it.

“...Once upon a time, some adults protected a doll they were supposed to kill. They hid it in a cupboard to keep it safe, and there was also a girl who was protected the same way,” she says in a low whisper.

My throat tightens.

“...The girl told the only man she knew she could rely on about how she killed her mother. The man felt pity for the family, so he protected the girl just as he protected the doll decades ago.”

Osanaga-san sent An-san away to summer school for 2 weeks while he took care of everything. He got rid of the body, and destroyed any evidence that could point to foul play, then told everyone that Chika-san killed herself. Anyone who knew about her life would think it made sense. Sakurako-san says that she probably lied about her address on her summer school registration out of guilt.

“I don’t know if the younger brother was an accomplice, or if he just caught wind of what happened to his sister, but it gave him leverage over the vice principal. We don’t know how An died. It could have been natural causes, or suicide. He might have hidden An’s death to extort money out of the vice principal, or maybe he just didn’t have enough money to pay for a funeral,” Sakurako-san mutters, then sighs.

“I wonder if meeting Yoshimi changed the situation Osanaga was in? I’m not sure when Yoshimi met him, but he might have wanted to get rid of the parasite infesting him so that he could live peacefully with his new wife. He committed his last crime to rid himself of that parasite.”

“So he hit Nobuhiko-san with his car…?”

But he didn’t know that Nobuhiko-san was carrying An-san’s skull with him that day…

“But all of that is just your imagination. There’s no foundation for it. My job now is to find a basis for it.” Yakuwa-san rejects Sakurako-san’s explanation.

“I’m a researcher. Sometimes it’s necessary to replace missing bones, which in this case I used my imagination. Though as you said, there’s no basis for it this time. All the key figures have already turned to bone,” Sakurako-san says with a forced smile that says

she gives up. She excuses herself to the washroom and leaves her seat.

Yakuwa-san sighs as he takes off his glasses and puts his fingers against the corners of his eyes to soothe them. He's always been busy, but he seems especially busy lately.

"...Are you okay?" I ask.

"..." He replies with silence.

The lack of an answer probably means he's not okay.

"But look at it this way, you were the catalyst that started this big story! Well… It kind of leaves a bad aftertaste, but…" I trail off.

Yakuwa-san sighs again as he puts his glasses back on. "In the end, we don't know anything about Hana Sumiyoshi's suicide, Why did she hang herself in front of a doll? Why did the doll have no head? Did it have anything to do with An's uncle?" He says. He looks down and forces a smile.

"...Most people only get to be featured in the newspaper maybe once in their life. It's something special."

"Ah… That's right. They only write articles when something special happens, after all."

Newspapers aren't like social media, where the slightest thing can go viral. They have a special meaning, like a person's whole life can be scooped up and contained in just a few lines of text.

"Newspapers are commonplace, and nowadays you can just check social media right away when something happens, but… Researching, hunting, and summarizing… Is really hard work."

I usually just use newspaper for covering the table when I paint plastic models, or other things it's not intended for.

"I do this job because I like it."

"But… it's not always good news, huh."

I remember Professor Shitara saying once that no matter how much you love your job, there's always difficult times. He said he always felt nervous while doing autopsies. Since Japan primarily uses cremation, an autopsy is the only chance a corpse gets to have its cause of death found. An inflated lung, for example, can never be returned to its original state once a scalpel has been put to it. So no matter what kind of corpse I come across, he wouldn't feel disgust or

fear. But even Professor Shitara hesitated when performing an autopsy on his friend. I've heard that even the best surgeons can't operate on close family members.

"Don't you find it hard when you're always talking to people about crimes?"

Yakuwa-san slowly shakes his head at my question. "For those of us who spend every day writing newspaper articles, it's just part of the process. That doesn't mean we just toss it aside after we're done writing, though. But if you hold onto it forever, you'll never be able to move on. So you write things down, and let them leave your mind, one by one," he says, casting his gaze downward slightly then giving a bitter smile. "Well, honestly, it's not easy for me to forget everything."

That way of thinking is something I'll need if I want to pursue forensic medicine. I straighten my posture.

"Anyway, I hate to admit it but this story is all thanks to you two." Yakuwa-san smiles warmly at me.

"Sakurako-san is a great detective, after all."

"Mhm. Hopefully she doesn't make the front page some day, though." The corners of Yakuwa-san's mouth turn up into a grin.

That's not funny…

"...I thought she was a bad influence, but without her, you wouldn't have been able to save someone's life."

"You're right."

It's true. Meeting Sakurako-san has taught me the weight of life and death.

"...But that's always how it is."

"What do you mean?"

"We're always bystanders, after all. We're always on the outside looking in at different events. Never related to what's going on."

No matter what happens, it doesn't concern us. Sakurako-san and I just pick up the bones that someone else left behind. From the beginning to the end, we're always just a third party. We have no choice but to watch the result from afar. And yet–

“It’s a blessing!”

“...Huh?”

A powerful voice blows away all the regrets that have settled in my heart. Yakuwa-san grabs both my shoulders so hard it hurts a bit, and looks me straight in the eyes.

“That’s fine. You don’t have to be directly involved. You don’t have to show up in the newspapers. If you do, though, it better be good news.”

“...I don’t think I’m the type to get in the paper for something good.”

“That’s not true. Besides, there could always be a tragedy looming just around the corner. Even good people sometimes commit murder. If something happens to you, I’ll be the first one to write about it.”

I feel embarrassed, so I look away, but he gently shakes my shoulders to get me to listen.

“...What happened?”

As soon as Sakurako-san comes back, her face turns pale and she grabs my arm with her still slightly wet hand. She pulls me away from Yakuwa-san and toward herself. She holds me tightly from behind. The warmth of her touch makes my ears feel hot.

“N-nothing happened! He was just giving me career advice!”

Career advice and life advice are both just different types of advice.

“I see. In the future, this kid is going to be an excellent forensic scientist who protects the dignity of the dead better than anyone else in Hokkaido. It’s a difficult job that is rarely understood. Make sure you cover all the good work he’ll be doing,” Sakurako-san says proudly. She’s still holding onto me.

I don’t think I’ll even be able to pass the exams in the first place…

“You don’t suspect us anymore, do you? Are we free to go?” She says somewhat arrogantly.

She lets go of me, and lightly brushes my now wrinkled blazer with her hand before we both sit back down.

“You’re grey.”

“What?”

“Some of the things you’ve done are technically illegal. You’ve stolen human remains from a crime scene before, haven’t you?”

“I would absolutely love to, but it would cause problems for the police and forensic scientists. In my uncle's honor, I barely manage to restrain myself.”

Barely… I already knew that, but I still almost spit out my tea.

“This is the end of the case, isn’t it? What a shame. You turned out to be very useful,” Sakurako-san says with a not entirely dissatisfied expression.

Yakuwa-san has a reliable information network that we don’t have access to on our own.

“I’m relieved,” Yakuwa-san says curtly. His voice is a little raspy, and he’s speaking faster than usual.

Maybe he’s embarrassed?

“I probably won’t need it again, so I’ll leave this picture of Saya Sumiyoshi with you and go home.” Yakuwa-san clears his throat, perhaps because he noticed the tremble in his voice.

“Saya Sumiyoshi?”

“In this group picture from before, she’s um… Probably this one.”

He pulls out the group picture we saw before and puts it on the table. It’s a happy looking commemorative photo taken after a rafting trip. He points to a girl in the photo with short hair standing near An-san. She has a slightly androgynous face with Japanese features. In the photo with just her, she has no expression at all. In the group rafting picture, she’s wearing a life jacket and helmet, holding a yellow paddle, and laughing together with An-san.

“Huh… She has a completely different expression in both pictures.”

An-san is holding her paddle above her head while Saya-san hugs her waist. We heard before that An-san was a quiet person, but seeing the two of them in this picture makes An-san look outgoing and Saya-san look reserved.

“...”

It’s a nice picture. I look up and see that Sakurako-san’s expression is stiff.

“...What’s wrong?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean… You look like something is bothering you, Sakurako-san.”

Yakuwa-san and I both look at each other.

“Is something the matter?” Yakuwa-san asks suspiciously.

“...No, it’s nothing. I was just looking at her outer ears. The shape of the feet and ears are greatly influenced by genetics, so I always check them.”

“So basically, you’re just talking about bones again.” Yakuwa-san lets out a sigh.

“Because that’s all I have,” Sakurako-san says with a smile. She puts the photo into her chest pocket.

Part 18

I feel reluctant to part with him, but Yakuwa-san is busy with work so we leave the cafe. We see him off in the parking lot before he heads back to Sapporo. As I expected, I feel really lonely. I wave both my arms in a wide arc. He raises one hand back at me while he slowly starts driving away. I feel like he’s smiling at me through the rearview mirror. I keep waving until he turns the corner and disappears.

“...He was scary, but he was a good person,” I mumble to myself.

Sakurako-san puts her hand on top of my head.

“I was interested in what kinds of articles that man writes, so I looked into it.”

“What were they like?”

“...I found one that was particularly interesting.”

Sakurako-san pushes on my back while she talks to move me toward the car.

“About 20 years ago, a diplomat named Yakuwa died in a terrorist attack.”

“...What?”

“Well… I just happened to run into an article about that. Anyway, boy, do you want to see Yoshimi?” Sakurako-san says cheerfully while I struggle to find what I should say next.

“What?”

“You saved her life, right? You should collect your thanks. Let’s go.”

“But… That’s fine, but why so suddenly?”

That being said, Sakurako-san does everything suddenly. She says that we can still make it in time for visiting hours, and starts the car. Sure, the hospital that Yoshimi-san’s staying in is only a stone’s throw from the tea shop. She had to be transferred to a different hospital to avoid the media after her case came to light. I heard she’s still recovering.

I’m surprised she let us visit, I thought she might refuse us. She has a private room to avoid any problems. It’s a spacious room and doesn’t feel oppressive at all, but the white walls seem to reflect her loneliness. Yoshimi-san greets us in the isolated room with no one else in it.

“Your complexion is normal. Much better than last time ahahaha.”

“Sakurako-san!”

Her face was so pale last time due to the carbon monoxide poisoning. I jab Sakurako-san with my elbow for her unfunny joke.

“Sorry for showing up on such short notice… We didn’t even bring a gift or anything…”

“Don’t worry about it. As you can see, I was lonely anyway, so I’m glad you came,” Yoshimi-san says, and invites us to sit on the couch.

“My father passed away a long time ago. About six months after my sister died, my mother got sick and also passed… The only family I had left was my husband. The only people who visit now are friends or coworkers,” she says with a sad smile.

She says she lost most of her friends after Kiyomi-san’s death. I can’t say it’s not the consequences of her own actions, though. Yoshimi-san softly smiles at me while I frantically try to think of something to say.

“The doctor told me. If you hadn’t started chest compressions right away, I wouldn’t have survived…”

“Um…”

But is that really what she wanted? The question crosses my mind for a moment. Yoshimi-san quickly shakes her head, as if she can tell what I was thinking.

“No… That day, I thought I was going to be left behind again. I couldn’t handle that, so I impulsively tried to kill myself… In the end, I’m glad you saved me.”

“Well… I’m glad, then.” I let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank you.”

I smile back at her, my eyes growing hot.

“I’m so, so glad… This time, I made it in time.”

The tears start to well up in my eyes. Shivering in that lavender-scented entrance. I have a flashback to the shock I felt that day when I saw a corpse for the first time. The fact that it was Kiyomi-san. That’s the reason I wanted to save Yoshimi-san. This time, I managed to save her in place of Kiyomi-san.

“Humans are solitary by nature. They instinctively form groups for protection, but there are few predators these days. It’s smarter to live alone to avoid cannibalism. We all end up alone in our caskets anyway.” Sakurako-san, still standing, tries to encourage Yoshimi-san, but her words are far from comforting.

Yoshimi-san makes a bitter smile. “But normal people still want to be together, even if it means sometimes getting hurt or cannibalized.”

“Only the weak say that.”

“It’s not a crime to be weak.”

“Well, whatever… Anyway, I’m glad you’re alive. It’s good that we got to you in time,” Sakurako-san says.

She sits down, not on the couch or chair, but on Yoshimi-san’s bed. Sakurako-san smiles innocently. She looks at Yoshimi-san from an uncomfortably short distance away. Although she’s surprised at first, that smile makes Yoshimi-san lower her guard and offer a semi-smile back.

“Well… Thank you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I should be the one thanking you.”

“Why?”

“Because now I can get the truth out of you.”

“Huh?”

“S-Sakurako-san?!”

Sakurako-san ignores our surprise, and straddles Yoshimi-san’s legs like she’s riding a horse.

“Why did you marry that man? How did you meet him? Did you know that he was pretending to be An’s guardian?”

“What do you…?”

“It’s pointless to feign ignorance. I’m not here to make you feel guilty. I just want to know the truth. All that matters is that I get my answers.”

“It was a coincidence. We just happened to meet at the hospital…”

“I see. Then let me change the question… Were Kiyomi Mizutani and Saya Sumiyoshi the same person?”

“What?!” Yoshimi-san and I both yell in surprise.

Yoshimi-san tries to escape by pressing the nurse call button, but Sakurako-san brushes her hand away while taking the photo out of her pocket.

“Her ear shape. The shape of the ears and the way a person stands are greatly influenced by genetics. They’re the same as yours. I remember the shape of your sister’s ears well. Actually, I never forget a human skeleton that I’ve met.”

“Ah… No… You’re wrong!”

“I’m not wrong. The ear shape in particular doesn’t change, even in adulthood. It’s very useful for identifying someone, as long as they’re sufficiently developed.”

Sakurako-san forces the picture closer and closer to Yoshimi-san’s face,

“Sakurako-san! Stop it!”

I try to rush over to them, but Sakurako-san cups Yoshimi-san’s chin and glares at me to signal me to stay back.

“Saya Sumiyoshi has the same ears as Kiyomi Mizutani. They’re probably not relatives. I’d bet they’re the same person.”

“Please stop! I’m scared! Go away! What’s wrong with you?! How can you be so sure?! Ears all pretty much look the same!” Yoshimi-san desperately struggles, and manages to hit the nurse call button.

“I have confidence in what I said! There’s no way I could be wrong!” Sakurako-san asserts at the same moment that Yoshimi-san presses the button.

Yoshimi-san’s eyes widen.

After a moment, a response comes through. “What’s the matter?”

It’s over…

“Ah… Sorry, I was trying to move my stuff around and accidentally pressed it.”

Yoshimi-san answers the nurse, somewhat hesitantly. I thought she was calling for someone to save her from Sakurako-san? I hear a click as the nurse hangs up. I thought for sure we were going to be kicked out.

“Um…”

Still, Sakurako-san's overbearing behaviour is going too far. But just before I can intervene, Yoshimi-san starts to laugh.

“Y-Yoshimi-san…?”

She laughs even louder, leaving me confused. It sounds more like she’s laughing at us than having fun. Sakurako-san stares coldly at Yoshimi-san until her laughter dies down.

“I knew it… I knew it from the first time we met,” Sakurako-san mutters once her fit comes to a halt.

“What?”

“The day we met… When I guessed that you worked at an eye clinic. You stayed calm, even after seeing your sister’s corpse, so I knew you had to be from ‘the other side.’”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know whether to call you a genius or a monster - just like your sister.”

“Like Kiyomi-san…?” I don’t understand what’s going on. I ask Sakurako-san with such force that I almost push her back.

Yoshimi-san laughs lightly as she takes the photo from Sakurako-san and hands it to me. When I see Saya-san in the picture, my expression relaxes.

“This picture was taken in Niseko when she was in elementary school. You’re right, my sister was Saya Sumiyoshi. She probably inherited her ears from our father, since we had different mothers.”

“Was Kiyomi’s mother Hana Sumiyoshi?”

“Yes… Hana Sumiyoshi was our father’s friend a long time ago. He’d been cheating for a long time. Eventually, she became pregnant with his child. My mother was having a hard time conceiving, so she agreed not to question our father’s relationship as long as she could adopt my sister.”

The day after she gave birth, Hana-san disappeared, taking Saya-san/Kiyomi-san with her. That’s why she went by the name Saya, not Kiyomi back then.

“But when it became clear that Hana Sumiyoshi was seriously ill, my sister came to live with us. She was in middle school. I had already been born, so it was too late for my mother. Ever since then, my sister ruled the family.”

“...Ruled?”

“It shouldn’t be a surprise. She’s just like the person who controls you. She’s just a bit better at lying, and being loved to the point of cruelty.”

“N-No, that can’t–” I want to scream “that can’t be true,” but I hold myself back at the last second. This is a hospital.

But the Kiyomi-san I knew was a pure and beautiful person, just as her name suggests… She was lovely to her core. She wasn’t the kind of person who would lie. It’s impossible. Right, it has to be Yoshimi-san who’s lying. That’s the only thing that makes sense.

“My sister always loved being loved, it was her specialty. She looked like freshly washed cotton, but was actually a pitch black, wet satin that clings to you.”

Yoshimi-san narrows her eyes at me as I bite my lip. Her voice is gentle, but there’s a hint of malice in her expression.

“My mother and I loved my sister. My father was afraid of her until the day she died. Before I knew it, I was always doing what my

sister told me to do. We started playing games together."

"What kind of games?"

"You two know about it, don't you? The game where a man falls in love with my sister, I snatch him away, and then he regrets it, suffers, and dies."

"Why… would you do that?"

Yoshimi-san doesn't answer the question. She just laughs slightly. Nausea churns in my stomach.

"So it wasn't just Kiyomi-san's fiance? There were other victims…"

"I dunno. I just did whatever my sister wanted me to do."

"Why–" I start to say something, but immediately realize it's a foolish question.

I'm sure she'd think the same. I'm the same, after all. I collect bones because that's what Sakurako-san wants. Before I knew it, this became what I wanted, as well. It's a game where you peel off the flesh and remove the bones from dead, rotting creatures.

"...In that case, why did Kiyomi-san die? Why would she take her own life!"

Sakurako-san pulls on my arm to admonish me for using too forceful of a tone. Yoshimi-san's expression warps as if she doesn't want to listen anymore, and turns away from us.

"Why… There's no way I could know the reason. I don't know what she was thinking. She was always silent and secretive behind her smile and beautiful eyes, but–" Saying that, Yoshimi-san brings her knees up and hugs them to her body. "--But I still want to know."

Then, Yoshimi-san found her husband, and learned about Kiyomi-san's real mother, but Hana-san had already passed away.

"And what does your husband have to do with all this?"

"..."

Yoshimi-san suddenly looks hesitant about whether she should continue or not. She looks at me, then Sakurako-san, then buries her face in her knees.

"We won't cause you any trouble. I promise. If your sister was like me, then you must know that I won't be bothered by justice or anything."

“Then… Why do you want to know?” Yoshimi-san asks in a muffled voice, without lifting her head.

“Because I can’t see it. I can’t see how An and Kiyomi and all the people involved in this case are connected, but I want to know. I can’t wait to find out,” Sakurako-san asserts, as if there could be no other possible reason.

Yoshimi-san looks up at her.

“My sister always used to say, ‘there is no reason, I just want to.’ You’re the same way. Then she’d throw a tantrum like a kid and I’d have to listen to her once I saw her smile.”

Yoshimi-san lets out a sigh until her chest is completely empty, then finally raises her head.

“My husband, Hana Sumiyoshi, and my sister were connected through An, of course. An Ichikawa deceived my sister a long time ago and ran away, breaking an important promise.”

“What was the promise?”

“...”

Once again, Yoshimi-san hesitates to answer the question. She nods her head as if to convince herself to continue.

“An Ichikawa and Saya Sumiyoshi… They were online friends. They met over the internet by chance, and felt like it was fate. They both had the same problem. They both held an unbearable hatred toward their mothers.”

“Hatred…? Not just An-san, but Kiyomi-san, too?”

“My sister thought that Hana Sumiyoshi ruined her life by forcing her to deal with being poor, so…”

“...They committed murder for each other,” Sakurako-san says quietly.

“What?!”

“...No, it was more like they were complicit. My sister wasn’t the one who did the actual killing.”

“I can’t believe this!”

“Boy.” Sakurako-san puts her finger to her lips to shush me.

“When An and my sister were younger, they made a plan together to kill each other’s mothers. But only An’s mother ended up dying. An didn’t hold up her end of the deal, and ran away like a

coward. Someone always protected An, unlike my sister who had to fight alone for what she wanted," Yoshimi-san mutters with a loathsome expression. "She was a coward. Her body was so thin and fragile looking that everyone loved and took pity on her."

"Then… Is that why you killed An-san? Because of Kiyomi-san?"

That… That can't be true. I frantically try to shut out Yoshimi-san's poisonous words. She smiles slightly.

"It probably wasn't my sister. An was probably executed. Someone, somewhere, decided to punish her… For hurting my sister."

"What do you mean by executed?"

"My sister was a monster. The woman who deceived her so that my sister would kill her mother for her was a monster, too. My sister laughed when she found out An was executed by someone else. She said that she was a liar and a bad person, so she deserved to die."

"No… That can't be…"

Since I met Sakurako-san and investigated all of these cases, I've learned that the ordinary and the extraordinary exist side by side, with only a vague line between them. Peace and chaos are side by side, too. Even if you think you're normal, that can change. People can easily switch between being normal and abnormal.

Yoshimi-san conveys Kiyomi-san's words to us in an unusually calm voice. Like she's having fun. I don't think she's lying. Life and death shouldn't be compared to anything else. They're not on the same scale. Life and death are unique. They should be valued above everything else. Lives should never be harmed. Even though I want to believe that so badly, I've been reminded countless times that it will never be true.

"Kiyomi-san… Said she was executed?"

"Yes." Yoshimi-san responds to my question with a smile on her face.

"Was there a butterfly?"

"Hm?"

“Like a preserved butterfly. Was one left near you, or the dead’s things?”

I understand all too well what Sakurako-san is getting at with that question. Yoshimi-san doesn’t seem to understand, though, and tilts her head slightly.

“I’m not totally sure, but I think my husband had one. I’m pretty sure it was An’s.”

“Do you still have it?”

“I don’t remember, it might have gotten thrown out during the house renovations… I wasn’t really interested in it,” Yoshimi-san says apologetically.

“Then do you remember what kind it was?”

“Yeah, I do. Umm… It was a long tail spangle.” Yoshimi-san looks up at the ceiling as she recalls the information with shaky confidence.

“It's a large, black butterfly with blood red spots on the bottom. It has long wings, and mimics the chinese windmill butterfly.”

“Mimics it?”

“Yes, it mimics another butterfly, rather than a different animal. The chinese windmill is poisonous, so predators don’t go after them. There are other butterflies like that, too, though…”

Sakurako-san sits stiffly by the bedside, legs crossed and brow furrowed as she’s deep in thought.

“...What about paintings? Did they own any paintings by a man named Hanabusa, or did they model for him at all?”

“An? Or my sister?”

“Either.”

“I don’t know. But I did hear that my sister modeled for a painting once…”

“Do you remember the name of the artist, or what kind of work it was?”

“I’m not sure, I’ve only heard about it. It was called Salome, and depicted her holding a doll’s head and kissing it. She said that the doll head prop was really heavy, so it was hard to hold it up.”

“Was the doll a Butterfly Maiden?”

“I don’t know that much about it… I think I’ve told you everything I can. It’s sad that my sister was so secretive that I only saw fragments of who she really was…”

When someone meets a natural genius or a monster, it becomes that person’s fate to have their life sucked out of them. Their life will change from the meeting, be stolen, and then they’re left as an empty shell. Empty like a doll, with only air and garbage filling their insides. A doll that can’t move by itself. A doll that can’t survive without a substitute life.

“I was attracted to my husband’s weak side because I’m similar, and we decided we should live together, but–” Yoshimi-san mutters in a rough voice, covering her face and lying on the bed. “Everyone leaves me,” Yoshimi-san takes a breath, then speaks in a shaky voice as she starts to cry. “But no matter how hard it is, morning will come. Even when I feel empty. I have to keep breathing, even when I feel like I’ve forgotten how to,” she says while looking at me before her eyes fill with tears. “Thank you for saving me, but I wish you had let me die.”

She slowly closes her eyes as the tears roll down her cheeks. A multitude of emotions rage inside of me. I struggle with them, the inside of my clenched fists burning hot.

Part 19

I rest my head against the car window, gazing blankly at the passing scenery. The snow is dyed red by the streetlights. Large flakes falling block my vision. It’s a road I’m very familiar with. I walk along it almost every day. I don’t need to be able to see it to know what the scenery looks like. But is that really true? Maybe I just think I know? I didn’t actually know anything about what kind of person Kiyomi-san was. About what secrets she had.

“So… Does that mean An-san and Kiyomi-san were both Hanabusa’s butterflies…?” I mutter without looking at Sakurako-san.

“...”

She doesn’t reply, just letting out a small sigh.

“What are you going to do now?”

“About what?”

“Well… About An-san and Nobuhiko-san. You’re really not going to tell the police? Or Yakuwa-san?”

“What’s the point in talking about it? Everyone involved is dead now. The only survivor, Yoshimi, might as well be dead.”

I feel my throat tighten upon hearing her cold words. If I were alone right now, I probably would have cried.

“At least we saved Yoshimi-san…”

Her life was connected to the 3 others. It’s hard for me to know that I’m leaving her unhappy after I acted as her heart.

But Sakurako-san says, “it’s pointless. People often put the weight of their lives on other peoples’ shoulders. My mother put her life on Soutarou’s back. When he died, my mother died, too. The dead can’t come back to life. They’ll stay dead for the rest of eternity.”

“...How are we going to explain this to Yakuwa-san?”

“We won’t. I have no intention of telling him about Hanabusa.”

“...I figured as much.”

“If we tell him, he’ll be in danger. This case was closed as soon as the vice principal died. If we leave him be, he’ll find a different case to focus on. He must have something else to do,” Sakurako-san says with an unchanging expression.

I thought so, too, but I feel bad about deceiving him. I send him an email asking if we can talk again if he ever comes to Asahikawa again. Of course, I don’t have the confidence to tell him everything.

That day c ame sooner than I expected. On Sunday, 2 days before Christmas eve, I get a message from Yakuwa-san asking to meet for lunch, since he’ll be in the area. Since he’s a fan of spicy food, we go to a ramen shop that just opened by the station that’s popular for its super spicy miso. I’m shocked at how spicy even the regular miso is. I buy a bag of baby castellas after and a warm drink to sip on as we walk around town together.

“I’m… Sorry you had to come all the way out here.”

“It’s not a problem. I enjoy meeting and talking to people. There are times when the truth is hidden in someone’s expression, gestures, word choice, or way of breathing.”

“At first, I thought you were… A misanthropist, and unemotional.”

Since he treated me to ramen, I offer him a baby castella as a small token of thanks. White steam rises from the soft, sweet, irresistible little cake.

“Oh, yeah, I hate people.” Yakuwa-san says as he takes three castellas from the bag and pops one in his mouth.

“Huh?! Den fhy?!”

Yakuwa-san laughs at my unintelligible voice. My soft, fluffy, sweet, freshly baked castella rapidly cools down in my mouth when I expose it to the cold winter air. They’re still delicious whether they’re hot or cold.

“I hate people, but their behaviour is interesting.”

I can’t help but burst out laughing.

“You’re just like Sakurako-san. She hates people, but loves their bones-”

“I don’t want to be compared to her. We’re completely different.” He sounds like he truly hates it.

But when we walk by the statue of a man playing his saxophone for a cat, Yakuwa-san brushes the snow off of it and fixes the scarf wrapped around it. Does he really hate people?

“...Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Well… Why did you decide to become a newspaper journalist?”

He chuckles at my question.

“You’re right, newspapers are past their prime now. They’re basically obsolete, heheh.”

“Ah, that’s not what I meant, but…”

That was an uncharacteristically negative comment from him, but there’s no sign of self deprecation in his expression.

“In this day and age, it’s easy to find witnesses to a crime, and even pictures or videos from the crime scene without ever actually going there yourself. You can even talk to classmates or coworkers of the people involved. It doesn’t take much searching to find a summary website with their social media accounts, but that’s not all.”

He passes the hot green tea he was carrying to me, then gathers up the snow from the statue and makes a snowball.

“It’s three dimensional.”

“Three dimensional?” I tilt my head to the side. He holds up the snowball to show me.

“The world isn’t flat. It has layers. When you look at it head on, you can’t see the other side, or the tiny imperfections. For example, the victim of a tragic crime might turn out to be a terrible person, while the perpetrator was actually the victim for a long time. Just like this snowball, a crime is a collection of many facts,” he says as he hands me the snowball. “There isn’t just one true perspective. It’s impossible to cover everything, but our job as journalists is to make the story as three dimensional as possible. Even if it’s outdated or misunderstood, someone has to do it.”

“…”

I hand him back the tea so I can take the snowball. It’s light, cold, and fragile.

“...Why do you want to be a forensic scientist?”

“Hm?”

“When we first met, that’s what you told me.”

“Oh… I guess it sounds weird, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know if it’s weird, but I don’t think many people would choose it.”

It’s rare for people to choose forensic medicine over just being a regular doctor.

“Is it… Because you think it’s a job that someone has to do?”

I met Sakurako-san by chance, and we happened to encounter a corpse while looking for bones. By the time they went from “dead bodies” to “remains,” I could no longer ignore their cries.

“People I respect taught me how to listen to what the dead are saying. I don’t think we in Japan give enough care or attention to the dead, or the families left behind. I think the dead should have their dignity protected just as much as living people do, and that doesn’t happen. I want to fight against that, even if I can’t do much.” When I add “of course, I have no idea if I can change society,” Yakuwa-san broadly smiles at me for the first time.

“...I see. There’s no other way then, then. You have to do it.”

“Yeah, there’s no other way.”

Feeling embarrassed, I hang my head down and laugh slightly. Yakuwa-san grips both my shoulders, and looks into my eyes. His eyes are light brown.

“In that case… When you do become a forensic scientist, I’ll absolutely write an article about you. I hope your small battle will sow seeds in someone else’s heart. That’s also a part of my job, after all.”

“What? Really? Hehehe, my mom and everyone will be so proud.”

It’s not often that your name appears in a newspaper. I’m sure my grandpas will be pleased.

“I don’t think I can change the world, either, but I still want to inspire and bring comfort to the people whose lives I cross paths with, and help them connect with others. Words remain, Tatewaki-kun. They last longer than a human life. They cross ages.”

“Longer than a life…”

Having said that, Yakuwa-san tries to hide his embarrassment about his enthusiasm by adjusting his glasses and saying that he should get back to work soon.

“But… Even with a job like mine, I rarely encounter death. There’s no way it’s a coincidence that you two happen to find so many dead bodies, and happen to be present at crime scenes. I thought you had to be doing something, but I guess this is a case where the truth is stranger than fiction.”

“Maybe something like that really is possible,” Yakuwa-san sighs in resignation.

But he’s wrong. It’s not possible. Sakurako-san and I are surely calling upon the corpses. He’s drawing close to a dangerous entity. If I tell him everything, maybe something will change. If only I hadn’t lied to him. If only I could find the courage to fight alongside him.

“U-um!”

“...Yes?”

“Um… Sorry you weren’t able to cover a big story.”

I have to say it– I thought, but in the end, I can’t bring myself to say the words I should, so I cover it up by saying something else.

The corners of Yakuwa-san's mouth turn up.

"Keep an eye on that outrageous person so she doesn't cause any huge problems, okay?"

"Um… I can't! There's no way Sakurako-san will listen to me if I tell her not to do something!"

"I know. So when that time comes, call me when you report her. I'll contact the editor and have the story on the front page immediately."

"That's not funny at all!"

I can't quite tell from Yakuwa-san's tone if he's joking or serious, so I reply with a bitter smile. Right, it's not funny. There's absolutely nothing funny about it.

So, I walk home, carrying a bit of regret. If I had told him everything, it would have put him in danger.

"It's for the best this way, there was no helping it," I tell myself as I make my way through the crowd awash with Christmas colours to the bus stop. Suddenly, a car honks its horn.

"Oh!"

When I turn in the direction of the sound, I see a familiar car parked there. Yoshimi-san is in the driver's seat. She's looking at me, and waving me over.

"Hello. Were you discharged from the hospital?"

"Get in."

"What?"

"Just hurry up and get in! We'll talk in the car!"

Overpowered by the tension in her expression and voice, I do as I'm told and climb into the passenger seat.

"...What's going on?"

"I'm going to die."

"What?"

"And you are, too."

Yoshimi-san's dark eyes are staring straight ahead, devoid of light.

"It's the past. People are bound by it. Emotions and memories are chains."

“Yoshimi-san?”

“When the person you love dies, your life ends. You die. Even if you’re still breathing. There’s no way to escape from the past.”

“…”

“It will happen to you, too. When you lose her, you’ll die.”

I don’t need to ask to know who she’s talking about. I’m well aware that I’ll lose her some day, and things can’t stay like this forever. She’s the most important person to me, but I’m not the most important person to her. I’ve already prepared myself for when we have to part. But am I really ready? Can I live in a world without Sakurako-san?

“But… I won’t become a doll.” I desperately try to squeeze those words out.

“That may be true,” she whispers softly. “I’ve been searching for a long, long time. Morning, night, when I’m alone, when I’m in a crowd, at random moments… I’m always thinking about my sister. I’m still searching for the reason why she died. I don’t know what she was thinking.”

“Yoshimi-san…”

“But there’s still a way for me to hear her voice. I’m glad I’m alive… I’m so happy that I didn’t die.”

“A way to hear Kiyomi-san’s voice…?”

Yoshimi-san looks at me with a crazed look in her eyes and bursts out laughing.

“Let’s go get that doll’s head back. That doll was actually my sister’s. I’m sure she’ll praise me if I get it back…”

“By doll, do you mean Hana Sumiyoshi-san’s…?”

Even after we learned about An-san’s death, we still never learned anything about Hana-san. We didn’t even find out where the doll’s head went.

“But how are we supposed to find it? And why me…?”

“There’s no other way. You have to cooperate, just like me.”

“Cooperate?”

“I mean, you made a ‘promise,’ right?”

A chill runs up my spine.

“There’s still work to be done if we want to protect the people we love. Isn’t that right? That’s why I’m going to make a specimen out of a foolish butterfly with you, too.”

“...So you’re another one of those ghosts…?”

The promised time has come. This is the day when I commit a crime.

Epilogue

“Hanabusa died on… September 14th… That can’t be true!”

There’s no way… The threat known as “Hanabusa” is definitely still out there. But Aoba-san’s expression looks serious. My stomach feels cold. Besides, September 14th… That’s the anniversary of my dad’s death.

“W… What? It can’t be… My dad?”

“Your dad?”

“September 14th is the day my dad died.”

My whole body, down to my fingertips, is trembling. It’s a coldness similar to fear. My consciousness feels hazy, and Aoba-san seems far away. Aoba-san looks puzzled by my question.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding. He’s probably someone else.”

“Oh… Ah… But still, he can’t be dead. I’m sure-”

“I understand what you mean, but he was a philosopher and an artist, as well as a criminal. Even if he’s passed on, the ghosts of the people who worship him won’t disappear.”

“Ghosts…”

And “he” called himself a ghost, as well. In that case, who is really the one messing with us…?

“I just so happen to know of one of those ghosts. Are you familiar with the story ‘Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus’?”

“As in the artificial human Frankenstein?”

“To be precise, it’s the story of a medical student named Victor Frankenstein who created a nameless monster in an attempt to create a ‘perfect being'. He created his monster from corpses.

Similarly, the ghost is trying to create a monster from corpses, as well. A monster called Sakurako Kujou, modeled after the perfect being Hanabusa."

"Why…"

I can't stop my body from shaking. Everyone says that Sakurako-san is a monster, even Aoba-san and Isozaki-sensei. It's true that her gaze is different from normal, but…

"...Sakurako-san will never become a criminal."

"The ghosts chasing you two aren't evil. He said that the ghost… Was about to become Prometheus. He gave fire to humanity, even though it meant incurring the wrath of an almighty god who sentenced him to have his entrails eaten by an eagle. Even knowing it was a crime, he still did what he thought was right."

"Does justice exist in belief…?"

I know people who have committed crimes because of their belief in justice. People who couldn't forgive a bad person, imprisoned them, and became criminals themselves. They were… Sad. When I was little, I thought "justice" had a simple meaning, but now I struggle to describe it. To protect someone, or see something through to the end. But sometimes there's a perpetrator and a victim. How do people decide where the line is drawn between good and evil?

"I wasn't his accomplice, but… I was his advisor. Whenever he needed knowledge of forensic science, he would contact me."

"...Isn't that just an accomplice, then?"

Aoba-san's smile freezes. He's probably angry, but he doesn't express that anger to me. He takes off his glasses, and quietly takes a deep breath. He presses his fingers against his eyelids, or rather, the sphenoid bone behind them.

"I feel the same way towards the justice system…" His voice is low. It sounds like it's echoing from somewhere dark. "His anger was different from mine, but his anger burnt with righteousness. He was a ghost who burned in the fires of hell, but yearned for the light of day. I can't think of him as a monster."

"Even if he did it in the name of justice, as long as he left people without their loved ones, he was still evil in my books. I'm

sure Sakurako-san thinks so, too. Do you really not agree with that, Aoba-san?!”

He slowly shakes his head. There’s a hint of pity in his expression.

“...You’ll understand one day. The laws in this country regarding the dead are all wrong. We aren’t trying to protect the living, or the dead.”

“Still…! Even so, I don’t think that anything can be okay just because it’s for the sake of justice.” I accidentally raise my voice, so I have to dial it back.

“It’s better than not believing in anything,” Aoba-san says in a soft whisper.

It feels like he’s telling me that I don’t believe in anything.

“...”

Unable to argue back, I take a sip of my tea in frustration. It tastes awfully bitter today. Aoba-san places his warm hand over mine on the table sympathetically.

“That’s all I can tell you. I don’t know much, either.”

“...If you don’t know anything, how can you protect me?”

“I have no way to contact him directly, but I can send indirect messages. Even though I’m his advisor, he’s indebted to me since I know about his crimes. I doubt he’d go against my wishes.”

That’s a good point. But… Still, Aoba-san is still Hanabusa’s ghost’s accomplice.

“Anyway, he’s trying to create a monster for his own justice. Even if it means destroying himself. I can’t stop it, in fact, no one can… It’s all up to the young lady.”

“...”

In the end, everything depends on Sakurako-san. No one can control her, she’s always free.

“He’s not a champion of pure, innocent justice. He hates evil, and exterminates it. If you don’t get in the way of his goals, he doesn’t have to get rid of you. That’s why he keeps his distance from the young lady.”

An exterminator of evil- that sounds more applicable than using nice-sounding words like “justice.” At the same time, it makes it clear.

Ghosts don’t hesitate like others do. That’s why the ghost uses evil people to eliminate other evil people. To reduce the amount of evil in the world by one. The thought makes me shudder again. There’s many evils in the world that can’t be punished by the law. The news is a constant stream of strangers committing crimes, and people angry at both the crimes and the decisions made by the justice system. Sometimes people become twisted and inhumane, calling for harsher retribution. Then, there’s people willing to carry that out.

“...How do I show that I’m not in the way?”

“Sometimes you’re given an alternative method, but if that’s not possible, then there’s just one other way to do it.”

“One way?”

I gulp.

“You only have to do it once. You will aid the ghosts. That is, you’ll be an accomplice, bound by the chains of a mutual crime. A contract. A promise that you’ll cooperate with them. Just once is fine. You’ll join them in making a specimen out of a foolish butterfly.”

Me? A crime?

“You’ll become an executioner with those ghosts, echoes of life.”